

CULTURE IN CONCRETE:

Art and the Re-imagination of the Los Angeles River as Civic Space

by

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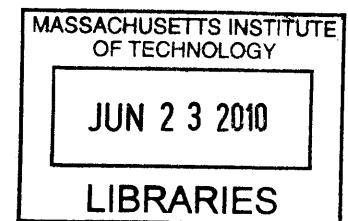
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Los Angeles River at the historic Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct.
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John C. Arroyo

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning on May 20, 2010 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in City Planning

ABSTRACT

The Los Angeles River is the common physical, social, and cultural thread that connects many of Los Angeles' most diverse and under-represented communities, the majority of which comprise its downstream corridor. It is a valuable resource that crosses boundaries of race, class, geography, and culture. Once a natural and alluvial river, a series of devastating floods led the Army Corps of Engineers to pave the 52-mile River with concrete in the 1930s. The River has been forgotten, abandoned, degraded, and largely misunderstood by many ever since.

Artists have taken to the River as a creative venue. Their actions have re-defined the River and have allowed us (and impel us) to re-imagine the River as the civic space that Los Angeles is desperately seeking, but has yet to find, despite many unsuccessful attempts.

This thesis examines the patterns, motivations, and history behind over 40 largely unheralded art projects over a 20-year period along the River's Glendale Narrows, Lower Arroyo Seco, and downtown Los Angeles segments. It illustrates why generations of artists from all disciplines have been inspired to engage with the River's concrete form and abandoned. From photography to site-specific dance, poetry to new media, these artists have reveled in the un-designed, un-planned, and the spontaneous nature of the River space. They have expressed themselves through place-based

work, most of which has been independent of any formal urban planning, urban design, or public policy support or intervention.

While this thesis acknowledges contemporary master planning efforts currently underway to transform the River, it makes a case for the power of under-represented groups (artists) to create value outside of traditional, formal, and normative urban planning and design interventions reliant on government support, public-private partnerships, and corporate interests. Furthermore, this thesis provides a review of popular critiques and previous interpretations of civic space in Los Angeles. It reviews Los Angeles' transition from a once mobile, accessible, and largely homogenous city to one of the world's most diverse and park-poor metropolises without a strong civic space. This thesis provides examples of the Los Angeles' recent and future attempts to create civic space in downtown Los Angeles and offers alternatives from domestic and international cases reflecting the principles of landscape urbanism, everyday urbanism, and temporary urbanism.

By engaging with the River as space for critical human and cultural expression, the research in this thesis suggests that artists are offering key insights for how to plan, design, and re-imagine the Los Angeles River as civic space.

Brent D. Ryan, PhD

Assistant Professor in Urban Design and Public Policy
Thesis Advisor

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

A native Angeleno, John is an urban planner, cultural producer, and writer who recently completed a Master in City Planning and Certificate in Urban Design at MIT's Department Studies and Planning (DUSP). While at MIT, John specialized in urban design, cultural development, and community regeneration. These interests led to various research and client-based projects in Cambridge, Boston, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Buffalo, NY. He was also a Research Assistant for MIT DUSP's partnership with the Leveraging Investments in Creativity's (LINC) Space for Change Program, a national arts initiative of the Ford Foundation and the MetLife Foundation focused on the role of affordable and engaged cultural facilities in community development, economic development, and urban design. He was active as an officer for the DUSP Students of Color Committee, a student representative for the Minority Student Recruitment Committee, a DJ for WMBR 88.1 FM, a member of the MIT Center for Future Civic Media's Department of Play Working Group, and a founding member of Queers in Urban Spaces and Planning (QUSP).

Prior to pursuing graduate studies, John fostered an extensive background and dedication to arts and cultural work. At the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, he managed professional development, technical assistance, and community cultural planning initiatives for individual artists, municipalities, and nonprofits arts organizations. John also coordinated programs for La Plaza de Cultura y Artes, the City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs, The Getty Foundation, Los Angeles Conservancy, Ruder Finn Arts and Communications Counselors, Inc., Canon Theatricals, and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). John has served as a grant panelist and juror for various local, regional, and national foundations, municipal governments, and arts and cultural organizations.

As an undergraduate at the University of Southern California (USC), John studied journalism and urban planning and development, where his commitment to Los Angeles arts and culture organizations earned him a 2002 USC Board of Trustees Renaissance Scholar award. He was recently awarded the American Planning Association's 2010 Judith McManus Price Scholarship for his commitment to planning issues in minority communities, selected as the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 2009 Mildred Colodny National Graduate Diversity Fellow, named a 2008 Latino Graduate Scholar by the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute, and received a Certificate of Recognition for outstanding cultural community service by the California State Assembly in 2007 and 2010.

Formerly, John has served as a nationally elected member of the Americans for the Arts Emerging Leaders Council and board member of the Highland Park Heritage Trust, Southern California Planning Congress, National Arts Marketing Project – Los Angeles Steering Committee, and the Emerging Arts Leaders/L.A. Task Force. He is also active with the Latino Urban Forum, Las Angelitas del Pueblo, and the Los Angeles Conservancy. He enjoys exploring cities, independent music, historic maps, and landscape photography.

DEDICATION

To Los Angeles, and all those who work to make it a better place.

To my abuelita (grandmother), for the years spent working in a textile factory alongside the River in order to give me a better life.

To all who dare to express themselves – no matter the obstacles.

"Nobody knows Los Angeles without knowing its river."

-- Joan Didion, writer

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To the resilient artists of Los Angeles River.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Army Corps	Army Corps of Engineers
City	City of Los Angeles
County	County of Los Angeles
CRA/LA	Community Redevelopment Authority of the City of Los Angeles
DCA	Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles
FoLAR	Friends of the Los Angeles River
<i>LARRMP</i>	Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (City of Los Angeles, 2007)
<i>LARMP</i>	Los Angeles River Master Plan (County of Los Angeles, 1996)
MRCA	Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority
NET	North East Trees
Public Works	County of Los Angeles, Department of Public Works
RMC	San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy
SMMC	Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
UEPI	Urban Environmental Policy Institute (Occidental College)

PREFACE

Growing Up by the Los Angeles River

When I was a child, I overheard a conversation that will remain with me for the rest of my life. “The Los Angeles River is a joke – there’s nothing there,” a man said by a downtown Los Angeles bus stop. Although I did not know how to interpret or respond to this statement, it replayed in my mind every time I traveled over the River on the historic First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct or when I rode my bike along the Arroyo Seco and Glendale Narrows. For me, the River is characterized by a significant duality. It is a stimulating space of fascination, wonder, and mystery. It is also a dividing cultural line and physical barrier between Los Angeles’ Eastside and the rest of the city. Clearly not a “joke,” it holds the potential to be a critical, emblematic, and unifying civic space for the Los Angeles region.

I was born and raised in East Los Angeles. The River was always a part of my life and urban experience. My earliest memories of the River were taking the #68 Bus down the former Brooklyn Avenue (present day César E. Chávez Avenue) and heading west towards the historic El Pueblo de Los Angeles in downtown Los Angeles. Although it was only a short distance from my house to the River, the journey was always an adventure.

Travelling over the historic River bridges, anyone can see how the River is a massive place. For most of its 52 miles, the River is covered in concrete on three sides. It is bordered by two 30-foot concrete levees and the actual channel itself is only one to two-feet deep. Heavy infrastructure, including rail (both cargo and passenger); an extensive freeway system; vehicular traffic; and light industrial warehouses line the River. On any given day, I can recall urban images ranging from debris and trash to the vivid and resilient graffiti displayed along the River’s concrete banks.

These images also characterized my own East Los Angeles neighborhood. Like the River, my community struggled with rampant

stereotypes by popular media that portrayed our space as negative and dangerous. Although this perception of East Los Angeles was difficult to combat, I was dedicated to the positive aspects of my community. East Los Angeles was known for its lack of open space, ailing public schools, public health and transportation challenges, a lack of adequate housing stock, and rising gang violence. Nonetheless, I was fortunate to find a strong and emphatic Latino community dedicated to expressing themselves through arts and cultural traditions.

I lived down the street from Self Help Graphics and Art, a leading community-based Chicano arts center. I recall enrolling in art classes, attending concerts and exhibitions, and supporting their annual *Día de los Muertos* festivities. I also attended the Los Angeles Music and Art School, where although my stints in drama and Mariachi violin were short-lived, I developed a newfound and keen passion for arts and culture. As I grew older, my continued association with a host of grassroots and community-based arts and cultural projects allowed me to continue to explore the role of arts and culture within my community’s dynamic urbanism.

Upon turning 16 and gaining a new level of mobility, I began to explore my interests in Los Angeles’ physical, social, and cultural patterns at a greater extent. It only took me a few drives into Los Angeles’ greater environs to understand the prevailing disadvantages of my own East Los Angeles community. The lessons I learned in seeing Los Angeles put East Los Angeles into a broader context and revealed the inescapable politics and complex landscape of race, space, and culture in this otherwise great city. Los Angeles’ urban and cultural ecology has both inspired and challenged me.

The River was full of art. Anyone who grew up near any of the River’s downstream communities during the 1980s is inevitably connected to the River by stories about the

legendary River CATz. On weekends, when heading north on the Golden State (I-5) Freeway to my grandmother's house in the San Fernando Valley, my siblings and I would anxiously await the concrete curve around Elysian Park to count the illustrations of cat silhouettes painted on the River's storm drains. We did not know anything about the policies or processes that supported or prevented the creation of these images – all we knew was that it brought us joy, excitement, and growing interest in the River space. These ephemeral and fleeting images left a critical imprint on my mind and soul, one strong enough to ultimately motivate me to write this thesis about the value of River-based art and the role it can serve to enhance urban planning, urban design, and policymaking efforts for the River's future.

A popular misconception about growing up in Los Angeles is that everyone has access to the region's pervasive beach culture. On the contrary, in my park-poor community of East Los Angeles, the closest large recreation space we had was the urban wilderness of the Los Angeles River. While not inhabitable or open to supporting wide-scale recreational modes, it provided an urban escape where many users, from artists to Latino families, would engage in social or cultural activities. As a participant and observer of these patterns, I noticed the River took on a different meaning in its downstream communities. In the hardscape of the industrial and often forgotten landscape of the Eastside, the River was accepted "as-is." Although my community saw relatively little promise in the River's ecological future, they saw great potential in its ability to elicit cultural engagement.

Not having traveled much beyond Los Angeles, the agricultural landscape of Central California, or rural Mexico, I had no other concept of what a river might look like. The Los Angeles River was my only example. When I think back to my family's native history in the central highlands of Mexico and rural Zacatecas and Guanajuato, I think about the Rio Jomulco in El Cargadero, a small river that was the lifeblood of the indigenous mountain towns, and the Guanajuato River, which the city transformed

from an underground aqueduct to a modern transportation system. These rivers were rooted in often dry or canal-like bodies of water aptly described by my own surname, *Arroyo*. In Spanish, *Arroyo* is defined as a dry creek or wash – either man-made or natural – that only floods during a rain season. Although not a natural *Arroyo*, I would soon learn that the Los Angeles River was the best-known urban example of this type of drainage system. Yet, unlike the "flood control channel" that contained the River, my own connection to the River was deep.

My experience with the River's geography is varied. I grew up near its industrial eastern waterfront, lived in Long Beach, near the terminus of the River with Pacific Ocean, and finally moved to the historic Arroyo Seco community of Highland Park, along the banks of one of the River's longest and most culturally prominent tributaries. While living adjacent to the Arroyo Seco in my mid-20s, I was inspired to witness the growing awareness and influence that the River had on my community's cultural ecology. I appreciated being a part of it.

Later, my interest in arts and culture materialized into a career focused on cultural planning. Of the many lessons I learned during my varied professional experiences, among the most important was my understanding of the power of art and culture to influence the urban planning and urban design of cities. Specifically, these lessons exemplified the value of arts and culture as powerful and compelling way to bring people together – our best hope for finding a renewed sense of civic life and space, especially in a region as fragmented as Los Angeles.

In 2008 I left Los Angeles for Cambridge, Massachusetts. At MIT, I decided to blend my interests in cultural development, urban planning, and urban design to explore the role of the River in Los Angeles' creative and cultural landscape. In my MIT masters thesis, I am embarking on a journey to discover, analyze, and advocate for the role of arts and culture to re-imagine the Los Angeles River as a civic space.

“Not quite the Ganges, is it? Not really a river anymore. Used to flood like a son of a bitch when I was a boy. They paved it all up in the '50s. London's got the Thames, Paris got the Seine. Vienna's got the Blue Danube. L.A.'s got a...concrete drainage ditch. It's all we've got. It'll have to do.”

-- Elderly Man Living in the Los Angeles River, Boomtown

CHAPTER **1**:

INTRODUCTION

Framing the Los Angeles River

The Los Angeles River is a unique ecological and cultural feature – one unlike any other in Los Angeles' urban landscape. Flowing 52 miles¹ through various multi-ethnic communities from the San Fernando Valley to the Port of Long Beach, its watershed hosts a diversity of land uses, from suburban to highly urbanized, commercial, industrial, and residential. Similar to the city and county through which it runs, it is a space² that is massive in scale, though largely misunderstood. It has been a horror movie set, a drag racing strip, and a flood control channel. But when was it a river? Originally a lush and alluvial river, a series of devastating floods during the 1930s initiated a thirty-year endeavor by the Army Corps of Engineers to encase the River in concrete. Urban planning and urban design have had much to do with the River in its current state.

The River continues to pose a host of problems ranging from infrastructure improvements and environmental remediation to the social and cultural aspects associated with the space. The Los Angeles region has less park acreage per capita than any other city in the United States. In an effort to address these issues and revitalize the River, local, state, and federal agencies have developed a series of long-range master plans for the Los Angeles region over the last 15 years. These include the *Los Angeles River Master Plan (LARMP)*, which was adopted by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 1996, and the current 2007 *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)*, led by the City of Los Angeles. In both master plans, the primary purpose of River revitalization is to improve aesthetics, environmental enhancement, recreational opportunities, and economic development.

However, despite this growing interest and awareness in the River's ecological and structural future, many of Los Angeles' artists have also established a unique and long-standing relationship with the River. While the River is popularly disparaged as a concrete flood control channel, a different legacy of less heralded art has re-imagined it as a source of inspiration, civic engagement, and a venue for creative expression along its downstream communities.

Planning the Los Angeles River

In Los Angeles, planning along the River has always been a complex and challenged effort. The importance of adequate engineering and infrastructure interventions has always been the

¹ The true length of the Los Angeles River is constantly debated. It is generally referred to as 51 or 52 miles, depending on whom you ask. The one-mile discrepancy accounts for the mile lost when the River was concretized, and thus straightened. For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to the River as 52 miles long.

² When I say River, I am referring to the "River space." I define the term "River space" as one that includes not only the flowing water and central flood control channel, but also the concrete trapezoidal banks and adjacent walkways (including both hardscape and softscape features).

fundamental factor in the River's modern³ planning efforts. While there is no substitute for necessary life safety measures, today the River is a venue where competing interests, ranging from environment protection to real estate development, are at stake. Among these are the interests of artists who view the River as an arena for art to investigate and comment on a larger cultural value system in Los Angeles. In fact, local artists have gradually, sometimes quietly, made the River into a cultural production center and living exhibition.

Large scale plans to revitalize the River are gaining momentum, but if these plans come to fruition, the River will lose much of its value particularly if it is over-commodified⁴ or over-designed. Jane Jacobs' theory of "cataclysmic" infusions of development addressed the problems related to over-design. Jacobs argued that in order to remake physical spaces into more attractive venues for global investments, host governments promote projects that depend on large-scale financing and large-scale change, rather than gradual ones (Jacobs 291). "First the withdrawal of all conventional money, then ruination financed by shadow-world money; then selection of the area by the Planning Commission as a candidate for cataclysmic use of government money to finance renewal clearance," wrote Jacobs (291). This is dangerous for the River because it may obliterate the current cultural legacy and importance the River holds for so many in Los Angeles.

The inherent creative energy of artists has become a counterpart to contemporary planning efforts to control the River. Amidst Los Angeles' creative capital, the River is a powerful focal point and venue for artistic intervention. Physically, the River's concrete hardscape makes it fertile artistic territory for things like site-specific dance and performance art, visual and media arts such as graffiti, and film screenings. Geographically, the River is accessible and centrally located within urban Los Angeles. Psychologically, the River is intriguing as a marginal and contested space, especially one facing recent, rapid, and to some, necessary change. Ultimately, the River is a locus of art that has provoked a resurgent creative energy.

³ I used the word "modern" to define the period of the Los Angeles River where planning and human intervention made significant alterations to the River's landscape (late 1930s to present day).

⁴ I use the term "over-commodification" to describe artists concerns regarding urban planning, urban design, and public policy efforts along the River. Artists fear that changes may sanitize, over-regulate, and prioritize real estate interests and corporate-driven urban development proposals that will potentially pose threats to the River's existing and future cultural energy.

The River is changing. A rediscovery and re-densification of downtown Los Angeles brought forth through a citywide redevelopment policy⁵, an increased consciousness and attitudinal shift in environmental stewardship and public health, and a lack of civic space have led urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers to propose large-scale multi-year strategies for the River. Perhaps the largest challenge facing the River today is reconciling policy decisions between both policy advocates and policymakers to consider a wide range of community and environmental concerns, especially when confronted with the current, ingrained, and traditional urban planning and design paradigms that characterize Los Angeles. Now, as the River is changing, what does art and culture tell us about the value of the Los Angeles River as civic space?

The Los Angeles River - Past to Present



Los Angeles River: 1868, 1894, 1909, and 2006.

© City of Los Angeles (*Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan*, 2007)

Research Motivation

Through my native perspective and subsequent professional experience as a cultural planner in Los Angeles, I have noticed a progressive outgrowth of art along the River as well as a rising interest in the cultural perspectives prevalent in its downstream corridor. This awareness informed my intent to define the River beyond the traditional infrastructure and engineering frameworks and explore it as a vernacular, and ephemeral cultural landscape that requires sensitive interventions.

⁵ The City of Los Angeles Adaptive Reuse Ordinance encouraged the conversion of dozens of historic and under-utilized commercial buildings to housing in downtown Los Angeles. The initial ordinance was approved in 1999, and later amended in 2003 to expand across the entire city.

My motivation to explore this topic developed out of my concern that traditional planning strategies for waterfront development were too narrow, too prescribed, and lacked the inclusion of dynamic arts and cultural interventions. I was mainly concerned with how the social and cultural processes occurring in the River space affected or transformed the space, paying specific attention to the relation between arts-based social organization and built form, and the reasons and ways why artists have adopted this environment as a place for art.

I believe artistic projects in urban spaces can help inspire new perspectives in urban planning and urban design. By looking to artists, we can understand and relate to public space in different ways. The art projects occurring in the River space provide a snapshot in time relating to the current physical state and social consciousness of the River. They are creative comments and responses to civic issues that illustrate the need for people to interact and communicate with others, despite the lack of civic space in Los Angeles. Furthermore, given the River's geography, the need for human and self-expression is heightened along the multi-ethnic and diverse River-adjacent downstream communities, many of which are located along Los Angeles' Eastside. As a result, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers must find a way to accommodate multiple forms of cultural expression.

My own personal reservoir of over 25 years of knowledge propelled me to investigate how urban planning and urban design should expand to embrace art and culture as a way to help planners think in interesting and innovative ways. As I thought about art, I thought about the River as a place for divergent activities for urban planning. Art and culture allowed me to see it from different artistic vistas and provided me new perspectives on how to interpret and consider the value of the River space in its current existence.

Initial Impressions

Over the last 30 years an outgrowth of meaningful and expressive arts activity has been produced along the Los Angeles River's downstream corridor. These include projects in the visual arts (photography, graffiti, murals, sculpture, metallurgy, and exhibitions), literary arts/poetry, media arts (film, mobile experience tours, and digital mapping), and performance (dance, music, and theater). These projects are multidisciplinary in nature and many can be described as civically-engaged. They range from officially sanctioned and publicly funded municipal or non-for-profit public art projects to guerilla art/street art and temporary installations. If the River is a microcosm of the physical and social issues that challenge Los Angeles, the cumulative power of these projects reflect a creative response to the region's fragmented ecology and persistent lack of civic space.

In many cases, these artists' perspectives differ from those of urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers addressing the River. Considering current civic consciousness to envision a

revitalized River, artists along the River share a valid concern that many of their projects will be compromised if civic space along the River becomes over-commodified and over-regulated. This tension proves that the River is not just a desolate spot on a map, but rather a hyper-real space that should not be conformed by authority.

Value of Arts and Culture Along the River

Art speaks to people's relationship with the environment (both natural and built) and serves as a valuable tool for community and individual expression. It fosters public interaction, communication, and in the case of the Los Angeles River, new forms of awareness, engagement, and international interest. These creative activities offer a snapshot in time to a specific and popular interpretation of the River. While there is a lack of accessible and creative venues in Los Angeles, the River succeeds in serving as a common meeting ground.

Arts activities are emblematic of the River's role as an alternative landscape, one that has allowed many people to interpret civic space and urban issues in Los Angeles. In fact, much of the unregulated art along the River is improving the area's quality of life by challenging traditional waterfront and cultural planning paradigms.

Whereas all across the world cities are capitalizing on formal cultural tourism campaigns, the Los Angeles River has reached and maintained its own global notoriety of being a venue for outsider art. The River is one of Los Angeles' largest civic spaces, and although it is currently inaccessible, it is valuable to see how artists view the space and have adapted their projects to it. Furthermore, despite the broad aims of River master planning efforts currently underway, careful consideration of the arts is one way to provide maximum utility without ignoring its more active and frequent users.

Although regulation is necessary to some degree, I believe that marginal spaces, like the River, should allow people to thrive at their fullest potential. A necessary shift must occur where urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should see the value of art and proactively seek opportunities to learn from their cultural influence. This is not to assume that the agenda of public agency actors is dedicated to planning for the community, but rather to demonstrate how art along the River can inform urban planners and urban designers who are planning in and with the community. If they recognize the physical and social value of arts and cultural activities, planners, designers, and policymakers can incorporate or elevate the importance of these projects in their future planning and implementation efforts along the River.

Art serves as a representative and primary lens for understanding the River because, despite its concrete, it has generated a powerful meaning. Artists have found beauty in what others deem ugly,

and have redefined the image of urban nature. While planning efforts extensively recognize engineering, infrastructure, and environmental issues, art remains under-recognized even though it represents a significant portion of the River's community and its truest users. The fact that art represents all of these topics through creative means makes it a more legitimate and primary lens because it reflects community and expresses a host of related civic and urban planning, urban design, and public policy issues. Art and culture holds an expansive role and potential to re-imagine the Los Angeles River. Today, as many of America's urban rivers are being rediscovered, reinterpreted, and revitalized, it is important to recognize that art and culture are just as important as environmental stewardship and engineering efficiency.

Research Question and Focus

The purpose of this study is to examine and explain the value of temporary and ephemeral artistic interventions within the public realm. Using the case of the Los Angeles River, I would like to explore how this marginal and overlooked everyday space can serve as civic space in Los Angeles. By analyzing the patterns and lessons of art on the site, I develop a theory for how art is re-imagining the urban environment and telling us about the River's true nature as civic space.

Given my geographic and personal relationship with the River, my research interests have led me to the following inextricably linked questions: *What type of arts activity, and to what degree is it occurring along the Los Angeles River's downstream corridor? What are its lessons, implications, and potential for future urban planning and urban design efforts to create civic space in a seemingly underutilized void?*

Methodology

Given that a major part of my research was the exploration of relatively unheralded artistic and cultural activity along the River's downstream corridor, I employed a mixed-method that was qualitative, impressionistic, and experiential. I began my research by conducting a survey of documented artistic activity along the entire Los Angeles River. I used this research to learn about and identify art activities of which I was previously unaware.

To limit my scope, I focused on projects specific to the River's downstream corridor, much of it along the River's Eastside. This 15-mile area is comprised of the three primary nodes of the Glendale Narrows, the Lower Arroyo Seco tributary, and the downtown Los Angeles industrial waterfront. These areas also comprise some of Los Angeles' most park-poor and urban communities, areas with a complex mix of racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially of Latino and Asian-American descent.

I primarily relied on semi-structured interviews (most of which took place in or adjacent to the

Beginning with a key set of stakeholders, I used snowball sampling to select interviewees. Interviewees included individual artists to executive and artistic directors of Los Angeles-based cultural groups, representatives from not-for-profit advocacy organizations, elected officials and staff, consultants, and citizens associated with the River. In total, I interviewed over 50 people. Appendice 1.2 includes a table that describes the interviewee characteristics and artistic River interventions. All interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and the majority were conducted in person in Los Angeles during January 2010. Interviews were semi-structured and reliant on a list of over 15 general personal and project-related questions about their relationship, history, interpretation, and visions for the River space.

Although I approached each interview with a broad baseline set of questions, I opted for interviewees to supplement my questions by speaking freely, openly and sharing their own stories about their relationship with the cultural landscape of the River and their artistic activation of the space. Whereas most interviews were with individual users, several interviews were more communal, relying on shared experiences of various users. Appendices 1.3 and 1.4 include a list of my two sets of interview questions: Artists and Planning/Non-for-Profit/Advocacy Organizations.

Most of the interviews were audio-recorded through previous formal consent of the interviewee and I hand-wrote notes during each interview. I photographed and video recorded a few of the art projects and interviewee comments about these projects for inclusion in *Thesis Chronicles*, a reflective blog I maintained simultaneously while writing my thesis. My column, titled “Art and Culture Mapping on the L.A. River”, appeared on CoLab Radio, the blog site for MIT’s Community Innovators Lab (CoLab). All of these interviews, observations, and experiences in general, both in and outside of the River space, have served to help me understand various perspectives of the River’s users and the cultural value of their projects.

I also attempted to bolster the research I collected in my interviews with my own visits and unstructured conversations with people along the River. However, walking along a series of pedestrian paths and spaces along the River’s downstream corridor, it was difficult to engage with users given that many of their activities were informal, unsolicited, and in general, grounds for trespassing (an overall pervasive issue along the River).

My research time-frame did not allow me to interview more users and actors along the River, thus there were several potential interviews representing the urban planning, policy, and

engineering perspectives of the River, both from local agency and non-profit sectors, which I did not conduct. Some interviewees responded later than my time in Los Angeles permitted.

For those not interviewed, I relied on including their perspective through previous news articles, video/audio-recorded interviews, official agency and organizational websites, and pamphlets. I supplemented these interviews with official reports, plans, and other visual and written materials documenting the formal future visions of the River. Upon reviewing all cases, I used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to analyze trends, patterns, and lessons learned by each, grouping these supporting examples by project type, activity nodes, and other relevant themes in order to understand their motivations, implications, and narrative significance to the current state and potential future of the River. Appendices 1.5A – 1.5H include all the maps from this analysis.

A Cultural Caveat

My interpretation of arts and culture encompasses both the recognized production of art as well as the under-recognized culture and creativity of the Los Angeles River's downstream corridor. In my analysis, art serves as an indicator of vitality and engagement along the Los Angeles River. The River also nurtures the culture of its mostly Eastside downstream communities, where I am from, and provides a creative outlet to preserve the identity, traditions, struggles, and successes of the region. However, I recognize that the River also hosts spaces for families to fish, spontaneous cycling events, and other religious or sacred ethnic or cultural rituals not addressed in this thesis. As a result of time constraints, it was also not possible to track everyday or vernacular patterns in a consistent manner given the difficulty to access the River in certain areas, but these activities are also important.

Thesis Structure

This thesis continues with Chapter 2, where I provide context to the Los Angeles River through its geography, history, and image. In Chapter 3, I review relevant literature and theories about art, space, and the civic realm with regard to the River. Next, in Chapter 4, I offer a tour of art projects along the River's downstream corridor. In Chapter 5 I analyze my findings and in Chapter 6 I explore my most important one, understanding the Los Angeles River as civic space. Finally, in Chapter 7, I conclude by providing positive future directions for art and culture in the Los Angeles River paying specific attention to creative solutions that can enhance the River's role as a civic space.

A Core Argument

At its core, this thesis is about the actual and potential shift of the River as a shunned, forgotten, and marginalized space to a creative and vital civic space. Using the River as my case, I explore what does happen and should happen in urban planning, urban design, and public policy when creative

professionals and communities react to this shift. Art and culture has provided a mode of use and engagement that has served the needs and desires of many local communities. As urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers superimpose a master plan, the River's arts and cultural community is concerned about the potential over-commodification dictated by public officials.

Although it is often considered an abandoned and abject space, the Los Angeles River is a unique and lively local feature of Los Angeles' urban landscape. Perhaps through the contemporary image often portrayed in Hollywood blockbusters or because of the lack of awareness of the River's existence, the dynamic, yet often unseen, relationship between the River and the people who live near it has increased exponentially. For historians, the River was a natural resource that catalyzed the development and configuration patterns of an early pueblo to a metropolis; for environmentalists, the River is the symbol of hope and a prime opportunity for environmental stewardship; and for artists, the River is an open canvas and landscape for creative and civic expression. For all Angelenos, it should be a civic space.

“If you can’t imagine the L.A. River as the swan in L.A.’s future, then try to imagine it as a truly spectacular duck.”

-- Jennifer Price, writer and L.A. River tour guide

CHAPTER **2**:

RIVER IN CONTEXT: Geography, History, Image, and Visions

This chapter explores the four primary contexts necessary to understand the Los Angeles River. The chapter includes a physical and cultural geography of the space, followed by a brief history of the River’s origins and flood control efforts (including a review of coordinated major urban planning and urban design efforts), and concludes with an assessment of contemporary images of the River and future visions for the resource.

Change is afoot along the urban waterfront. In the United States and across the world, the industrial landscapes of abandoned, polluted, neglected, or under-utilized waterways are undergoing a transformation. This recent trend in citywide revitalization efforts over the last 30 years is most especially true for urban river restoration efforts in metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, where decline and devaluation resulting from the collapse of industrial economies and environmental degradation has required new solutions.

Coupled with a new public awareness for environmental activism, the once derelict Los Angeles River is now facing a host of restoration and revitalization options rooted in engineering and urban design. Yet the complexity of the River's situation lies in not only what the River will become, but also whom it will serve. Will the gestures be driven by the local community, focused on real estate interests, or will they come from elsewhere?

The outgrowth of these revitalization efforts has also brought to mind the geography, history, image, and future visions of the Los Angeles River, recalling historical visions and considering new ways to interpret its landscape and improve the lives of those who engage with and perceive it. Considering Los Angeles' diversity, there is no common or citywide image of the River. "The river did not have a pre-established written memorable history before its transformation, and therefore it doesn't have an image in the institutional memory of Angelenos," stated Tran Le in her MIT thesis about urban stream management (55).

A PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Los Angeles River Watershed

Today the Los Angeles River runs through a vast and complex watershed. Beginning at its headwaters in the Santa Monica Mountains, the River flows 52 miles through the San Fernando Valley from the west in Canoga Park, east through the Glendale Narrows past the Arroyo Seco Confluence,⁸ and through downtown Los Angeles and the Gateway Cities⁹ to the Pacific Ocean, where its mouth meets the Port Long Beach and Port of Los Angeles, one of the largest harbors in the world and the busiest port complex in the United States. Along the way, the River traverses 13 municipalities and crosses 47 political boundaries (*LARRMP 2*).

⁸ At 22 miles, the Arroyo Seco is largest tributary of the Los Angeles River.

⁹ The Gateway Cities of Southern California are cities located in southeastern Los Angeles County. They include Vernon, Bell, Commerce, Maywood, Bell Gardens, Cudahy, South Gate, Lynnwood, Compton, Paramount, Carson, and Long Beach.



Illustration of the Los Angeles River Watershed.
© Joe Linton

Prior to being engineered as a flood control measure, the River's watershed included a network of rivers, streams, arroyos, creeks, washes, tributaries, and wetlands. Most of these natural resources have been replaced with common urban infrastructure such as sewers, streets, power lines, freeways, railroads, and transportation corridors moving goods from the Port of Los Angeles and Port of Long Beach into the city.

Today the Los Angeles River Watershed covers a land area of 834 square miles, spanning from the Santa Monica Mountains to the Simi Hills in the east and from the Santa Susanna Mountains to the San Gabriel Mountains in the west ("Los Angeles River Watershed"). Over the course of 200 years, the River has evolved from an uncontrolled, meandering River providing a valuable source of water for the

region's early indigenous inhabitants to a major flood protection waterway. Contemporary and critical debates now question how the River will evolve in the next 50 years.

Defining the Los Angeles River's Downstream Corridor

The communities of Los Angeles' downstream corridor have always reflected a vibrant culture, in part due to its strong ties to the Los Angeles River, or the *Paimé Pahite*, as the area's native Tongva (Gabrielino) Nation called the lush and sacred resource hundreds of years ago. This area is largely comprised of the span of the River between the Verdugo Wash in Burbank to the historic Washington Boulevard Bridge, just south of downtown Los Angeles, before the River enters Vernon. While much of Los Angeles' Eastside is adjacent to the waterfront, this geographic scope is the closest generalization I can come to defining this place within Los Angeles' continuous and contentious Eastside versus Westside debates.

In late May 2009, a large group gathered east of the River at Boyle Heights Eastside Luv¹⁰, a popular bar and performance venue, to claim their geographic turf in a poetry slam. The topic: The true Eastside. Although this battle has lingered for decades, an increasing development-driven exploitation of the term has caused "the true Eastside" to set the record straight. For these poets, it is no longer an issue of semantics or nomenclature rivalry, but rather an assault on their community identity. Amidst stanzas about the geographic importance of the Chicano movement, working class Latino immigrant census tracts, taco trucks, and local high schools, one fact was not debatable: *the indisputable dividing line between Los Angeles' east and west sides remains the Los Angeles River.*

The River was historically a convenient and geographic way to divide East L.A. from the rest of downtown. "Today people just drive past the River, but they don't see the culture of the area," said Victoria Kraus, a writer for the popular *LA¹¹ Eastside Blog*. "People have misconception of what is Eastside, geographically and culturally." "East L.A. is poor economically, but rich in life, music, family, and culture," said James Rojas. According to Esmeralda Bermudez, the journalist who covered the aptly titled "A Tale Bout Titled Between Two Eastsides" for the *Los Angeles Times*, there is an added complication when New Eastsiders tend to say 'East L.A.' when referring to neighborhoods east of the

¹⁰ The establishment's spelling of the word "love."

¹¹ Los Angeles is a city with one of the longest original names (*El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora, la Reina de los Angeles sobre el Río Porciúncula* – see Chapter 2, Footnote 19), but the shortest abbreviations. As a result, the author makes a conscious stylistic effort to not abbreviate "Los Angeles." When abbreviated, the author prefers to use "L.A." over "LA." "LA" is only used as a formal gesture to represent the formal terms that use this abbreviation (i.e. LA Yellow Box, Islands of LA, the Echo Park Film Center's *This is the LA River* mini-documentary, A Map for Another LA, etc.).

River. Although popular knowledge agrees that my native unincorporated East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights are definitely part of the Eastside, the geography is unclear for the communities of El Sereno, Lincoln Heights, and more affluent parts of Mount Washington and Highland Park. "Depends on who you ask – just don't go west of the river," Bermudez stated in her article (3).

Further complicating the situation is that idea that the true Eastside is a formal "community with legal boundaries, an unincorporated section of Los Angeles County that is one part of the overall Eastside" (3). For Jason McDaniel, a professor of political science at Scripps College as well as a resident of Silver Lake, "What matters is their mental map: where they live, where they drive, what their social connections are. We just have to be careful to not ignore entire communities because of our limited geography." But for native Eastside poets and artists like Ruben Funkahuatl Guevara, the preservation and respect of the Eastside is not explicit to those outside its formal boundaries. In a haiku, Guevara wrote:

East of the river
A community fights back
Colonization
East of the river
A community fights back
Gentrification

In a recent *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Finding the real L.A.," Hector Tobar offered the following sentiment: "Near its center and in that amorphous area many people inaccurately call 'the Eastside' is the old city, which grew up around the junction of the Los Angeles River and the Arroyo Seco. It's the time-worn L.A. you see in neighborhoods such as Echo Park and Watts. For me, those places are the baroque heart of the city" (qtd. in Tobar).

Journalist and writer Patt Morrison shared similar feelings about the new pastime to engage in a revisionist mapping of Los Angeles' geography. In a February 2009 article featured in her popular *Los Angeles Times* Opinion Column, Morrison wrote, "So do not go trying to cheat Thomas Bros., or even TomTom. All the city's street numbers – east, west, north, south – begin at 1st and Main downtown; it is Greenwich, the prime meridian of L.A., from which all distances are measured. And ever since the Spanish showed up, 'Eastside' has been anything east of the Los Angeles River – Boyle Heights, Lincoln Heights, Glassell Park. Not Silver Lake. Not even Echo Park" (1). Morrison argued that the Eastside is unique and that once you cheat the true Eastside of its name, you devalue its culture and landscapes, from the Evergreen Cemetery to the Los Angeles River, and all the history and future associated with these spaces.

A year later Joe Linton, cycling advocate, *L.A. Creak Freak*¹² blogger, and author and illustrator of *Down by the Los Angeles River: The Official Guide to the Los Angeles River*, wrote a piece about a thesis-based River-related mental mapping exercise I gave him. In his blog, Linton highlighted my definition of the Eastside's boundaries and validated that "what is east is east and what is west is west is a point of contention for Angelenos (though I know for certain that the River is the dividing line)" (Linton, Blog). Although I recognize that the span of the River is much larger than my research shows, the scope of this thesis focuses on the River's downstream corridor along the Eastside waterfront. This approach has a two-fold significance since it is the area of the River that has the most personal relevance for me, and also it is a manageable geographic location given the time considerations and limitations determined by the thesis writing schedule.

The goal of my thesis is not to settle the debate of how the Eastside is constructed or determined on physical, social, or cultural levels, but rather to uncover some of the informal, undercurrent, and otherwise not-so-often seen imprints of arts and culture on its landscape through the River space. Although part of my scope may be geographically central (downtown Los Angeles) or northeast (Lower Arroyo Seco), these areas are segments of the River that are socially, culturally and uniquely representative of the Eastside's urbanism. Additionally, it is an area where art production is occurring more rapidly and in greater volumes than in other areas of the River – a phenomenon I hope to explore in this thesis. Despite my unofficial geography boundaries, my frame for the River's downstream corridor waterfront encompasses the River nodes of the Glendale Narrows, Arroyo Seco, and downtown Los Angeles.

Glendale Narrows

The Glendale Narrows is a six-mile stretch that connects the River from its beginnings in the San Fernando Valley in Burbank to the River's main industrial channel in downtown Los Angeles. It is a narrow passage within Los Angeles' Elysian Valley bordered by the Golden State (I-5) Freeway, Griffith Park, Elysian Park,¹³ the Santa Monica Mountains, and the communities of Los Feliz, Silver Lake, Echo Park, and Elysian Valley¹⁴ to the west. To the east lay the remnant railroad infrastructure of Taylor Yards

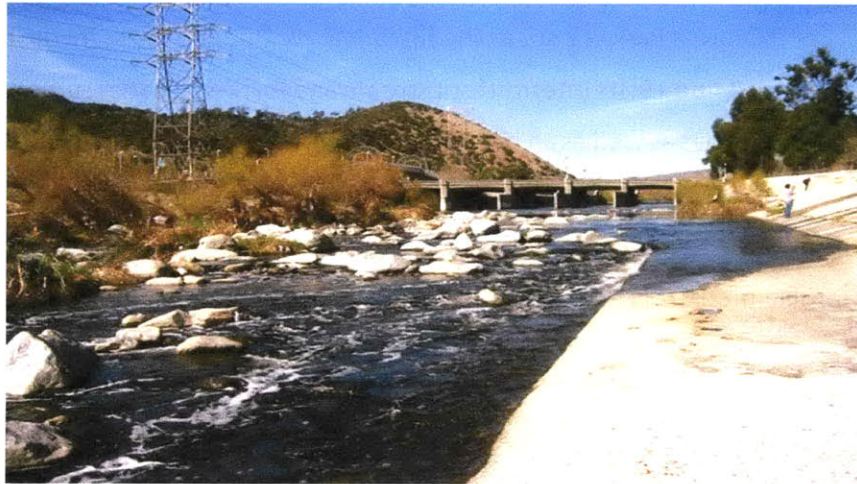
¹² LA Creak Freak began in 2006 with the goal cover topics "towards healthy Southern California streams, creeks, rivers and neighborhoods." The majority of the blog is dedicated to the Los Angeles River's natural ecology and habitat, but it also covers interests related to the River as public space that can "address a complex mix of urban needs."

¹³ Elysian Park is one of the largest and most historic parks in the City of Los Angeles. It was one of the City of Los Angeles' first large parks.

¹⁴ Commonly referred to as "Frogtown" within the local community.

(present-day Los Angeles State Historic Park), the Verdugo Mountains, and the communities of Burbank, Glendale, Atwater Village, Cypress Park, and Mt. Washington. The corridor is comprised of mostly light industrial and residential neighborhoods. Riverside Drive is the area's main thoroughfare.

The most unique feature about this segment of the River is that it is one of the few areas where the River has a soft bottom. In this area, strong rushing water flows down the river due to a unique and forced "spring-like" hydrology. This portion of the river resisted the Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps) early concretization tactics. Instead of paving over this leg of the River, the Army Corps opted to deepen the channel, a gesture which allowed for the area to also boast some of the largest amount of plant and animal life along the River.



Glendale Narrows at full stream (near the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge).
© laist.com

It includes lush vegetation such as willows and sycamores, as well as various species of aquatic birds, including the popular Great Blue Heron. Most of this wildlife is located on a series of sand islands at the center of the channel. This is due to the area's high and particularly strong water table, which made it impossible for the Army Corps to initially pave this section of the River. The natural state of this portion of the River has also allowed for small islands to grow, many of which have become a haven for large homeless encampments along the River. I visited these islands during my research period.

While the demographics of these communities have shifted to include a new influx of White residents, these communities remain some of the most diverse in Los Angeles, comprising large percentages of Latino and Asian-American families, many of which are low-income. They are largely home renters and recently, of second-generation origin. Although the geographic terrain of these communities includes Griffith Park and Elysian Park (two of the region's largest parks), these

communities continue to seek access to other civic space and recreational and cultural opportunities. Several of the most active stakeholders in the area include the River's primary advocacy group, the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), North East Trees (NET), Friends of Atwater Village, Center for Law in the Public Interest, The City Project, Elysian Valley United, Fernandeno Tataviam Band of Mission Indians, Gabrieleno/Tongva Band of Mission Indians of San Gabriel, The River Project, and the Sierra Club.

Lower Arroyo Seco

The Arroyo Seco is the largest tributary of the Los Angeles River, beginning in the north in the Pasadena portion of the San Gabriel Mountains and draining the southwestern section of the San Gabriel Valley in an 11-mile flow through the communities of South Pasadena, Hermon, Highland Park, Montecito Heights, and Cypress Park. It ends at the historical confluence near Lincoln Heights, below San Fernando Road and Avenue 19. Its intermittent stream and fertile plain has served as home of dispossessed indigenous tribes as well as an infrastructural conduit between the Pasadena, the greater San Gabriel Valley, and downtown Los Angeles. The area was also a nationally acclaimed recreation and cultural area that drew attention from President Theodore Roosevelt, who upon seeing it in 1911, proclaimed: "This Arroyo would make one of the greatest parks in the world" (qtd. in Brick).



A view of urban nature in the Lower Arroyo Seco.
© Flickr.com (chimatil)



River-adjacent infrastructure in the Lower Arroyo Seco.
© Author photo.

Aptly titled, the area is primarily a dry stream lined with river stone at its bottom and concrete levees on its sides. Rainstorms during the winter months often caused seasonally dry creeks running down from the surrounding mountains to develop into raging flood paths. As a result of inevitable climate, topography, and safety concerns, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the federal government took over the project in July 1935 and designated the City of Los Angeles as its flood control sponsor (Fraim 234).

Given its strong roots in arts and cultural heritage, the Arroyo Seco comprises a strong and active civic-minded intergenerational community proud of its cultural legacy and environmental assets; this is the same community that inspired the area's contemporary and historic creative renaissance over 100 years ago. Arroyo Culture idealized the notion of "living in nature" for all aspects of life, promoting a California interpretation of England's Arts and Crafts movement as well as a celebration of the Southwestern desert lifestyle adapted by the Tongva Indians and the region's Hispanic culture. This fervor for urban wilderness inspired an archetype for Southern California¹⁵, one that was led by poet, journalist, and social commentator Charles Fletcher Lummis. It is evident in the art, architecture, and artifacts of his most prominent legacy to Arroyo culture, the Southwest Museum, located at the base of Mt. Washington.

Current signs of creative expression in the Arroyo Seco have expanded to include the graffiti art along the banks and bike paths of the tributary. Active community stakeholders in the region include the Arroyo Seco Foundation, Highland Park Heritage Trust, Arroyo Arts Collective, Anahuak Youth Soccer Association, Audubon Center, and local City of Los Angeles Neighborhood Councils and schools.

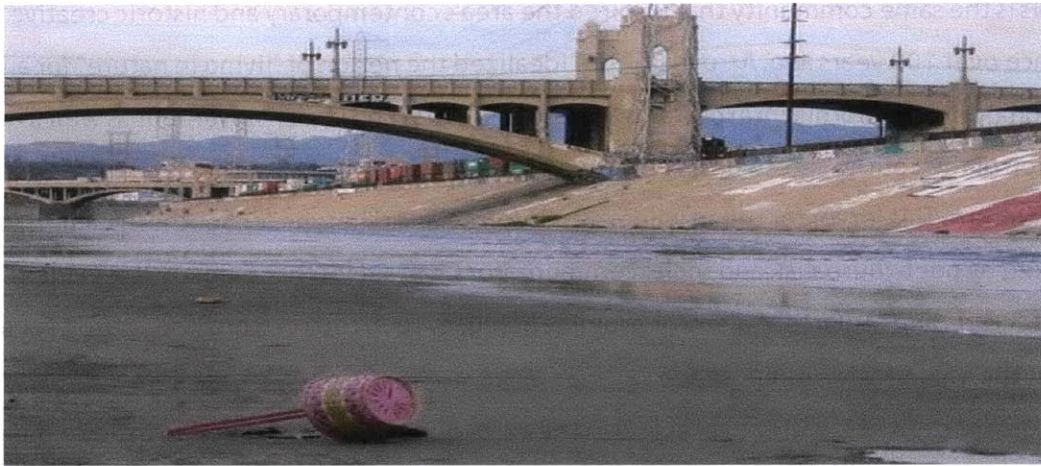
Like the Glendale Narrows, the area is comprised of a large Latino and Asian-American population, most of which moved to the area on account of its affordability when compared to other parts of central Los Angeles or the neighboring cities of Pasadena, Glendale, or Burbank. Today the Metro Gold Line light rail runs through the western part of this area and Ernest Debs Regional Park, a 282-acre woodland park and site of The Audubon Center at Debs Park, occupies the eastern portion.

Downtown Los Angeles

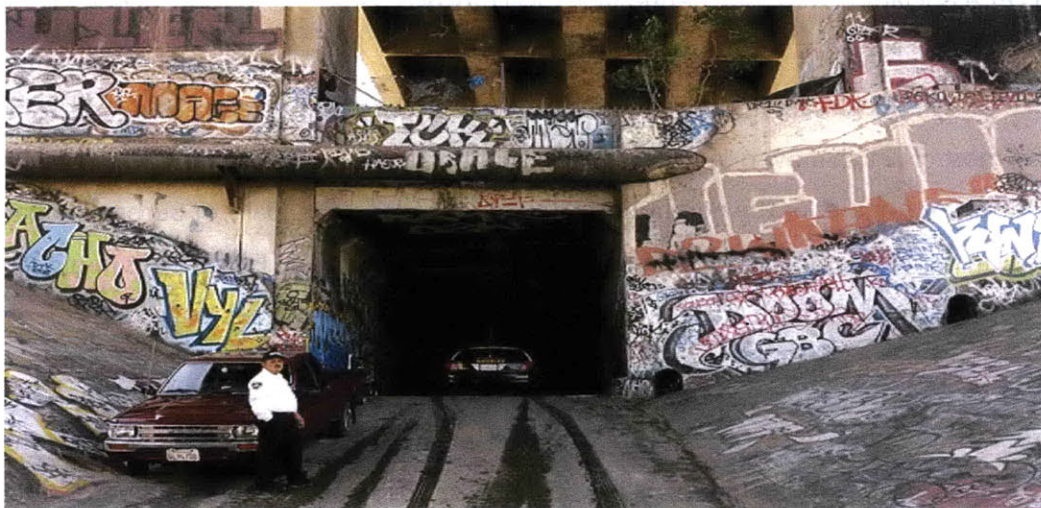
From the confluence to its City of Los Angeles' southern boundary at Washington Boulevard, the River meanders through the industrial banks of central Los Angeles. This area is bordered by the

¹⁵ Loosely defined by the five county region including Los Angeles County (4,061 square miles), Orange County, Ventura County, San Bernardino County, and Riverside County, composed of over 100 municipalities with the largest, the City of Los Angeles.

downtown Los Angeles Central Business District, Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and the Golden State (I-5), Hollywood (CA-101), and Santa Monica (I-10) Freeways to the west, as well as the communities of Lincoln Heights, Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and the USC Medical Campus to the east. The landscape of this section of the River is predominantly light and heavy industrial. Although its banks are marked with the permanence of railroad infrastructure, miles of urban street art, from graffiti to wheatpasting¹⁶, as well as the classical Beaux Arts and Art Deco forms of the series of historic bridges that line this portion of the River, have made it a popular place of interest.



Downtown Los Angeles, near the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct.
© WorldChanging.org



Downtown Los Angeles, at the entrance to the River from the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct.
© latimes.com

¹⁶ The process of creating a liquid adhesive made from vegetable starch and water used to display guerrilla posters or other forms of paper-based street art.

Culturally, the area adjacent to downtown Los Angeles is home to one of the largest Latino and undocumented populations in the country, made up of mostly first and second generation Mexican and Central American people, as well as Los Angeles' largest homeless population, one of the largest in the country. Its proximity to Los Angeles' Chinatown, Little Tokyo, and Historic Filipinotown also make it a gateway for Asian immigrants.

Further Downstream

While the scope of this thesis focuses on the downstream segment of the River that falls within the jurisdiction of the City of Los Angeles, the River continues downstream for 20 more miles. It crosses neighborhoods with similar characteristics to the River's Eastside waterfront including several of Los Angeles County's Gateway Cities and Long Beach, where the terminus of the River meets the Pacific Ocean.

Access to Green Space

Urban development and flood protection modifications consumed the once abundant open space in the Los Angeles Basin, leading to the channelization of the River and subsequently compromising green space along its waterfront. As the city with the least percentage of civic space and park land of any major urban center in the nation, Los Angeles' citywide lack of green space has become a key agenda for the River's future. According to the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works, "Only 4 percent of the land in the city is devoted to open space and parks – compared to 9 percent in Boston and 17 percent in New York City" ("Los Angeles River Master Plan"). The need for green space in Los Angeles is further substantiated by the *Green Visions Plan for 21st Century California*, a report published in August 2008 for the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy. The report stated:

"the City of L.A. has 7.3 park acres per 1,000 residents, its communities that are predominantly Latino only have 1.6 park acres per 1,000; African Americans have 1.7 park acres per 1,000 residents; and tracts dominated by Asian-Pacific Islanders have 0.3 park acres per 1,000 residents. In contrast, L.A. City's predominantly White neighborhoods enjoy 31.8 park acres per 1,000 residents, where in sections of primarily Hispanic East Los Angeles there are only 1.2-4.8 acres per 1,000 residents (Sister5).

Geographically, most of those diverse communities lacking park space lie east of the River, where apart from the River itself, freeways and industrial infrastructure divide it from the rest of the city. Seventy years after its concretization, the River has grown from a physical barrier, to a larger economic issue emblematic of Los Angeles social disparities. Having observed the city from a spatial perspective, Reyner Banham, in his classic book about Los Angeles urbanism, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, wrote:

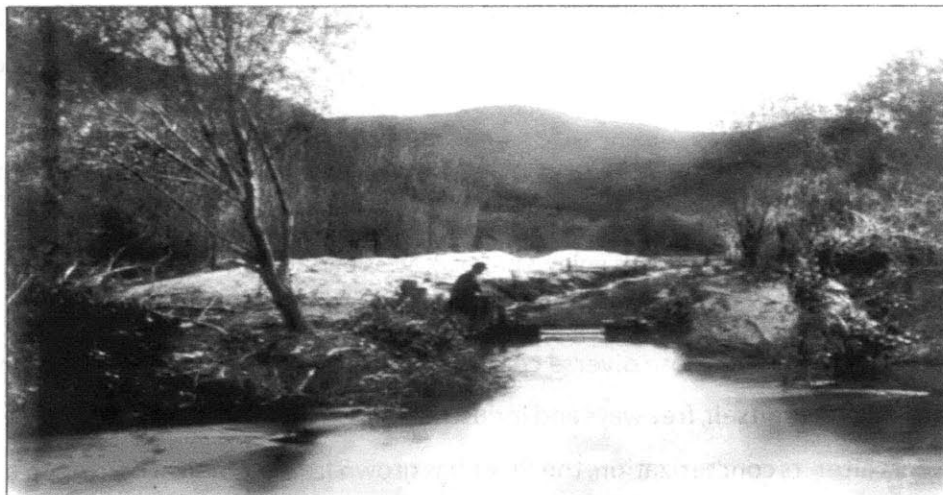
"Eastward from the Los Angeles River, the sequence runs: Highland Park, Pasadena, San Marino to the south, Sierra Madre, and then they begin to tail off with decreasing conviction through Monrovia. This decrease of conviction stems from a basic socio-economic consideration which becomes stunningly apparent on any map that shows the distribution of average incomes: the financial and topographical contours correspond almost exactly: the higher the ground the higher the income. But – and this is where Los Angeles lines up with other cities for once – who ever heard of any rich suburbs east of any downtown?" (Banham 79).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RIVER

"A Delightful Place Among the Trees"

Prior to the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct in 1913, the Los Angeles River was the primary water supply for the enduring pueblo as well as generations of native Indians. Formed by a large watershed and interconnected system of tributaries (many of which have their own sub-watersheds) that drained the Santa Susanna Mountains, San Fernando Valley, and San Gabriel Mountains, the River's geological and geographical placement made it a unique natural resource among Los Angeles' largely pastoral, and yet undeveloped, landscape. It remained an ideal source of water for the early agricultural settlement and Los Angeles' main water source for over 120 years.

Before engineering and infrastructural interventions punctured the River, water flow wavered from a gentle stream to a turbulent flow during the winter season. This was in part due to the River's poorly defined channels, which soon would lead to a flood control issue. As it was the only place where water flowed year round, the confluence of the River with the Arroyo Seco made the fertile bank side land a prime location for the indigenous villages of the Tongva¹⁷ Nation.



The River in its most natural state (during the early 1800s).
© Los Angeles Public Library / Security Pacific Bank National Collection

¹⁷ The Spanish renamed the *Tongva* "Gabrilenos," after the Mission San Gabriel.

The Tongva were hunters and gatherers who lived off the abundant wildlife found along the River's path. Historical records account that there were at least 45 Tongva villages adjacent to the River in the San Fernando Valley and Elysian Valley.

To adapt to flooding, the Tongva built their central community, *Yangna*, as a movable settlement, allowing the village to be relocated as the River flooded or dried. For the Tongva, adapting to the River's unstable course was a necessary form of sustenance and a part of their daily life, one which led them to seek higher ground around 1400 C.E. (Gumprecht 29). Its path was unstable and unpredictable, and the mouth of the River alternated between Long Beach and Ballona Creek.

The Spanish Take Notice

The initial arrival of the Spanish in Southern California was in 1542, through the arrival of Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo's expedition in the San Diego Bay (Elrick 8). Later, during an expedition led by Gaspar de Portolá in 1769, Fr. John Crespi, a Spanish missionary, accounted:

"...After traveling about a league and a half through a pass between low hills we entered a very spacious valley, well grown with cottonwoods and alders, among which ran a beautiful river from north-northwest, and then, doubling the point of a steep hill, it went on afterward to the south...As soon as we arrived, about eight heathen from a good village came to visit us; they live in this delightful place among the trees on the river." (LARRMP 1.4).

A few years later, due to accounts like these, Governor Felipe de Neve ordered Captain Fernando Rivera to establish a settlement for a pueblo. Founded 9 miles southwest of the Mission San Gabriel, the pueblo of Los Angeles soon became the largest town among Spain's California holdings (Gumprecht 29).

Upon arrival, the Spanish named the river *El Río de Porciúncula*¹⁸ *de Los Angeles*. This name would be the basis of the official name for the City of Los Angeles, which was founded in 1781 as *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora, la Reina de los Angeles sobre el Río Porciúncula* (the Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels over the River *Porciúncula*)¹⁹ (Pool A-1). The *Tongva* were forcibly moved to the San Gabriel Mission and soon after the Spanish laid out plans according to the Laws of the Indies,²⁰ a

¹⁸ The River was named *Porciúncula* in honor of the Italian chapel near Assisi, Italy.

¹⁹ The original name given by the Spanish to the City of Los Angeles is consistently up for debate. While this name is the one most commonly found in the records of Franciscan Missionaries', *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora* is a commonly accepted abbreviation. See Pool, Bob, "City of Angels' First Name Still Bedevils Historians." *Los Angeles Times* (March 26, 2005), Sec. A-1.

²⁰ A historic town planning concept conceived by the Spanish where a church and other civic services were the focal point in a grid-based system.

gridded pattern still evident and intact at the present day Los Angeles State Historic Park. Los Angeles was now critically positioned as an outpost to produce food for the four presidios and 21 missions across California.

Beyond Irrigation

As the pueblo grew, so too did its need for water, and a series of complex irrigation ditches was created, with the largest being the *Zanja Madre*.²¹ By the mid-1800s, as a result of ceding California to the United States after the Mexican-American War, Los Angeles' thriving agricultural empire caused exponential growth. This allowed the development of a garden paradise to coincide with the California Gold Rush, the construction of the transcontinental railway, and massive immigration, especially from the Midwest and East Coast. Once lush and verdant landscapes were replaced with railroad tracks and other permanent signs of industry, development, and overall infrastructure. This movement was indicative of the city's aim to address economic, rather than aesthetic, concerns dedicated to attracting more investment, business, and tourists.

This growing reliance on the River and the irrigation system caused it to run shallow, dry, and according to landscape photographer John Humble, "exploited to extinction" (52). By the early-1900s, farms had turned into residential subdivisions. The need for irrigation declined, while the need for domestic water increased. With the River rendered irrelevant, modern engineering freed the city from its reliance on its now mostly dry aquifers. In the early 1900s, this allowed for the construction of a 233-mile aqueduct system from Los Angeles to the Owens Valley from which the city would soon exploit massive water resources. Although these events overshadowed the need for the River, they significantly contributed to making Los Angeles the most important city in Southern California (Gumprecht 39). This controversial process continues today, almost 100 years later. But whereas the city could replace the River as its natural source of water through strictly designed engineering and infrastructure, the River would not stand to be forgotten or ignored.

Los Angeles was no longer a small pueblo. With the selection of San Pedro as the site for the city's harbor in 1899, the city needed a heavy series of rail infrastructure to connect the center of the city to the port. By default, the River provided a direct route with minimum grade change, a physical characteristic of the River that would cause more industry and infrastructure to follow, including a series of freeways between the 1930s and 1970s. One of the most prominent was the 1960

²¹ The *Zanja Madre* was "The Mother Ditch," the historical and main irrigation ditch that fed water from the River and into the city. Remnants of its water wheel can be found at Los Angeles State Historic Park.

Pasadena/Golden State (I-5) Freeway interchange, which obliterated the River's Arroyo Seco Confluence and severed it from both Elysian Park and Griffith Park.

And whereas massive flooding once harmed only a few, frequent unpredictable flooding in the late 1930s now caused major property damage and large-scale devastation. In an effort to combat this citywide distress, the Army Corps built levees where the River lacked banks, which led to a larger host of environmental and drainage problems for the Los Angeles basin.

Flood Control

Originally an alluvial River, the River ran across the Southern California basin alternating its terminus south between Long Beach and west towards the Ballona Creek. But as the city grew, so too did the risk of damage and death. Early flood control efforts in Los Angeles developed out of small, private, often uncoordinated and inefficient local efforts. In 1914, local residents began the first local formal coordinated effort of River management as a result of catastrophic floods from the mid-1800s. These strategies often addressed upstream flow with infrastructure solutions. Nonetheless, these efforts were not enough to protect the growing Los Angeles basin from increasing flood risks. "Even before the first extensive flood control projects were begun, it was rarely viewed as an asset or a thing of beauty, as something to be saved. Rather, it was an occasional hazard that had to be controlled," wrote Blake Gumprecht, author of *Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (270).

With the passage of the 1936 Flood Control Act by Congress, the Army Corps would soon take over management of the River and design an ambitious plan to construct concrete floodwalls along its banks. A thirty-year project, this resulted in the enlargement, straightening, and encasing of the River. This effort reduced the River to the concrete sewage flood channel visible today. Frequent and devastating floods throughout the 1930s created a larger case for River problems, with the 1938 catastrophic flood serving as the breaking point. The city was desperate for flood control measures.

According to writer and urban theorist Mike Davis, in his classic apocalyptic view of Los Angeles, *Ecology of Fear*, "The Los Angeles River – the defining landscape of the nineteenth-century city-was sacrificed for the sake of emergency work relief, the preservation of industrial land values, and a temporary abatement of the flood problem" (Davis 71). Today the human relationships people have established with the Los Angeles River have drastically changed over time, beginning with a nurtured and natural River during the reign of the Tongva Indians, to a source of water for an expanding agricultural empire, to a concrete flood control channel created by the Army Corps. Davis stated:

"As the Army Corps of Engineers has often reminded its critics, Los Angeles, sited in an alluvial plain at the foot of a rugged, rapidly eroding mountain range, has the worst flood and debris problems of any city in the Northern Hemisphere. Before 1940, at least half of the city's flatland area was subject to periodic overflow from the Los Angeles River" (69).



1913 Los Angeles River flood in the Arroyo Seco, near Figueroa Street.

© Highland Park Heritage Trust

In his book, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, Norman Klein examined Los Angeles tendency to erase and neglect its past, to the detriment of the city:

"Developers selling the 'belle-vue' tend to overbuild flood plains and slide areas; while master planners during the thirties had the L.A. River cemented over. The sum effect has nearly eradicated what once were massive underground lakes, very abundant aquifers. Water tables continue to drop immensely. Innumerable species have disappeared" (83).

Today the River flows in a concrete flood control channel. It delivers massive amounts of rainwater to the sea during the rainy season. These flood waters come from the Santa Monica Mountains, the Verdugo Mountains, the Santa Susanna Mountains, and the San Gabriel Mountains, and collects more urban runoff from Los Angeles and Pasadena down its path to the Pacific Ocean. In the dry season, about 80% of the water in the River consists of treated tertiary recycled sewage water, including authorized industrial discharges and street runoff ("Los Angeles River Master Plan"). Due to the fact that water does not percolate into the ground flows down the River, very little water ever reaches the channel. This would include natural water sources such as the Sepulveda Basin and other dry reservoirs and tributaries like the Tujunga Wash and Verdugo Wash. This is paradoxical given that during the 19th century, Los Angeles was among the most productive agricultural counties in the United States on account of this water source.

Ultimately the Army Corps paving of the River removed the resource from the public's sight and imagination. "The severe concrete encasement disguised a natural resource as a public works project," wrote River oral historian Hillary Kaplan. "The county renamed the river to reflect its new purpose, christening it 'Flood Control Channel' on maps and documents" (Kaplan). From that point on, Los Angeles would begin an incessant struggle to find, access, and define its River and its sense of a shared space for the arts.

MAJOR URBAN PLANNING AND URBAN DESIGN EFFORTS ALONG THE RIVER

Over the last hundred years, urban planning and urban design efforts along the Los Angeles River have varied in prevalence, scope, and governance. These efforts began with small, localized, and often private gestures to facilitate flood control and beautification in the late 1800s and early 1900s and moved on to unrealized large-scale comprehensive plans by the Olmsted Brothers & Bartholomew & Associates in the 1930s. These plans were followed by drastic interventions by the Army Corps to concretize the River.

Recent plans led by the County of Los Angeles and City of Los Angeles, both independently and now as joint forces, have established advisory committees and master planning frameworks. These include large considerations for the River's entire 52-mile length, to more focused plans, such as the current Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan, published in 2007 by the City of Los Angeles, and its predecessor, the Los Angeles River Master Plan, approved by the County of Los Angeles in 1996. The following reviews a detailed list of the history, visions, and outcomes of some of the River's most important and relevant urban planning and urban design efforts.

Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches in the Los Angeles Region (1930)

Olmsted Brothers & Bartholomew & Associates
Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce

The 1930s signaled a major change for the physical course and future planning efforts along the Los Angeles River. This began with the Olmsted Brothers and Bartholomew & Associates' comprehensive proposal to connect a network of parks, playgrounds, schools, beaches, forests, and transportation to promote the social, economic, and environmental vitality of Los Angeles.²² The plan

²² The Olmsted Brothers had previously proposed and executed several important projects in the Los Angeles Region, including the planning of Westwood Village's commercial corridor and Palos Verdes Estates.

was born out of the Olmsted Brothers' dismay for the city's lack of parks and other recreational areas – "a recreation crisis," as they termed it. Funded by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in an effort to show their commitment to civic space in Los Angeles, *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches in the Los Angeles Region* recommended 71,000 acres of parkland, and another 92,000 acres in outlying areas, with 440 miles of connecting parks and parkways, including a parkway along the Los Angeles River (Olmsted and Bartholomew as reprinted in Deverell and Hise 99). According to the opening of the report:

"Continued prosperity [in Los Angeles] will depend on providing needed parks, because, with the growth of a great metropolis here, the absence of parks will make living conditions less and less attractive, less and less wholesome. . . In so far, therefore, as the people fail to show the understanding, courage, and organizing ability necessary at this crisis, the growth of the Region will tend to strangle itself"(83).

One of the largest values of the plan was its ability to develop a system of parks, playground, and schools to make optimal use of open space while anticipating future development and population growth. From the outset, it succeeded in establishing a regional ecological perspective and long-range vision that not only addressed design, but also finance, implementation, and administration. Its improvements would have cost \$230.1 million to implement and 40-45 years to complete²³ (Gumprecht 266). Although costly, these funds would have combined parks and flood control works and water supply infrastructure to yield high returns in the long run (Olmsted and Bartholomew as reprinted in Deverell and Hise 16). Instead, the consequences of the 1929 crash of the stock market and subsequently, the Great Depression, rendered the plan infeasible.

The plan would have created a regional authority for parks in Los Angeles resulting in an unmatched landscape of civic space – the antithesis of the city's contemporary park-poor image. According to Mike Davis, the plan was "a heroic culminate of the City Beautiful era in American urban design," "a window into a lost past" (Davis 67). At grave expense to the Los Angeles region, typical power struggles over civic space gained momentum and the city's public officials rejected the report. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. was right when he commented, "the things that make [Los Angeles] most attractive are the very ones that are the first to suffer from changes and deteriorate from neglect" (62).

Apart from parks, the Olmsted Report also proposed regulations to prevent building on floodplains and recommended that 17.6 miles of parkways be established along the Los Angeles River – from the Tujunga Wash to Elysian Park and from the River's confluence with the Rio Hondo to north Long Beach (267). The plan sought to maximize and connect the system with parkways along other

²³ This was seven times larger than the entire City of Los Angeles budget in 1930.

mountain ranges (San Gabriel Mountains and Santa Monica Mountains) as far away as Orange County and the Pacific coastline. "By acquiring wide strips of land along the river, the natural character of the stream course could be preserved while keeping development far enough away from its channel to reduce the need for more traditional flood control work," stated Olmsted and Bartholomew (267).

Los Angeles River Task Force (1990)
City of Los Angeles

During the 1990s, former Mayor Tom Bradley recognized the need to find solutions to the problems of the Los Angeles River. These included physical and social concerns about access to the environment and civic space in the Los Angeles. By pulling together a variety of stakeholders (engineers, community members, planners, elected officials, artists, business leaders, families), Bradley created the Los Angeles River Task Force to "articulate a vision for the future of the River" (Orsi 152).

This was an important step in considering the River's future because it was the first time the city gave social concerns equal weight as natural and physical concerns. It signaled Mayor Bradley's concern that the people of Los Angeles had few safe and welcome places to recreate and gather, and that many were passionate about reclaiming the River. It also began the trend of establishing coordinated efforts between inter-governmental agencies to lead river efforts and represent varied, and often disparate, visions for the River. These included new options for flood control and life-safety issues, public use and space advocacy, and methods for increasing public awareness on the River. In total, 11 established goals framed 148 suggestions, forming the basis of the 1992 official report from the City of Los Angeles (153).

These goals included meeting flood control needs, restoring the River's natural ecosystem wherever possible, and maximizing public uses and recreation opportunities along the River. "As the task force struggled to integrate so many River uses and to involve so many River users, flood control in Southern California faced its most radical possibility for change since its institutionalization in 1914," commented Orsi (153). While the Task Force's proposed three major demonstration projects remain unrealized, the only visible result to come out of the 1992 report was the installation of an official Los Angeles River sign, a collection of blue signs featuring the silhouette of a Great Heron which were installed on River bridges across the city.

Los Angeles River Master Plan (LARMP) (1996)

County of Los Angeles

In 1991, in an effort to create opportunities for recreation and aesthetic improvements along the River, the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works, Parks and Recreation, Regional Planning, and other related agencies began to develop what has become the first iteration of a local master plan to revitalize the River. The *Blueprint for Action*, completed and adopted by the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors in 1996, covered the entire span of the Los Angeles River, including a portion of the San Fernando Valley's Tujunga Wash. Based on a multiple-objective strategy, it included a primary focus on flood protection, life-safety issues, and improved River aesthetics, followed by "environmental enhancement, recreational opportunities, and economic development."

Overseen and guided by an Advisory Committee of over 50 members representing federal, state, city, county, other local public agencies, and environmental and community groups, new regional and local projects were proposed and reviewed by both the Army Corps and Department of Public Works to ensure proper review for construction and structural integrity, respectively. Projects included the development of pocket parks, bikeways, landscape improvements, environmental events, and other aesthetic and community-driven improvements. Perhaps its largest accomplishment was convening various inter-governmental agencies to consider the implications of larger access issues to the River including long-term maintenance, liability, and security. When published, it was intended to be a model for the County and for other projects across the Los Angeles River Watershed²⁴.

The need for the *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)* became even more critical after the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. In a survey conducted by Rebuild L.A.²⁵, 77% of the residents in Los Angeles noted open space as an absolutely critical need in their communities, second to youth services. Rebuild L.A.'s research also showed that people were looking for public and quasi-public lands in which multiple uses could be created. Respondents recognized the importance of traditional parks, but were also in unique spaces which provided more than just typical recreational uses.

When published, the *LARRMP* was considered a pioneering document. While it was a step in the right direction and a provided the necessary framework to begin a dialogue about the future of

²⁴ The only tributary of the Los Angeles River that was included in the *LARRMP* was the Tujunga Wash. There was no mention of the Arroyo Seco, despite its historic, ecological, and cultural importance.

²⁵ A not-for-profit corporation formed by former Mayor Tom Bradley and former Governor Peter Wilson to address the social concerns surrounding the civil unrest.

the River, its vision was limited to basic guidelines for signage and landscaping. The plan did not include proposals for large new parks at Taylor Yard (present-day Rio de Los Angeles State Park) and the Cornfields Yards (present-day Los Angeles State Historic Park) – these would develop later through community-driven efforts – as well as small pocket parks such as Marsh Park, Steelhead Park, Egret Park, or any number of pocket parks designed, constructed, and maintained by NET along the Elysian Valley. The end goal of the *LARMP*'s process was to support the publication of a 20-year blueprint for the River to be developed and maintained by the City of Los Angeles.

Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP) (2007)
City of Los Angeles

Public concern for improved recreational opportunities, access to green space, and community activism stimulated Los Angeles Councilman Ed Reyes to establish the Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River. With a mandate to represent stakeholder interests while managing projects and policy-focused coordination efforts, the Committee commissioned the development of the *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)* in 2005.

The City of Los Angeles approved the plan in 2007. It was a comprehensive study conducted by engineers, urban planners, urban designers, architects, landscape architects, and policymakers that proposed extensive improvements to the River's flood control channel by building an open space network through parks, habitat restoration, an infrastructure serving multiple benefits."²⁶

Initiated by the formation of a committee in 2002, this plan sought to build from the County of Los Angeles' 1996 *LARMP*, with a specific focus on the 32 miles (about two-thirds) of the River that flow through the City of Los Angeles (between Canoga Park to Vernon). It was touted as the "first comprehensive proposal for River restoration."

Developed by a private consulting firm, the plan calls for 239 projects²⁷ focused on "greening the neighborhoods, capturing community opportunities, and creating value," including new parks, open space, pedestrian and bicycle trails, and improved hardscapes through aesthetic features and landscaping. Other goals of the plan included basic quality-of-life improvements for residents and wildlife protection, promoting economic development, and establishing a new framework for environmental stewardship among the public agencies that establish, design, implement, and

²⁶ A primary objective used to describe how the needs of one constituency should not dictate the entire River's restoration efforts.

²⁷ Ad Hoc L.A. River Committee, *Meeting Notes*. 30 Oct. 2007.

evaluate river projects. These goals have been concentrated on five opportunity sites, three of which fall within the geographic scope of this thesis: Taylor Yard, Cornfields/Chinatown, and downtown Los Angeles.²⁸

A 25-50 year blueprint, the *LARRMP*'s success relies on its ability to integrate governance structure, a more complicated task than the one faced by the County of Los Angeles' 1996 *LARRMP*. Instead of only coordinating inter-City departments, the *LARRMP* is charged with coordinating regional planning across the River with a series of federal (Army Corps of Engineers), state (California State Parks), and local (City of Los Angeles and County of Los Angeles) agencies. The establishment of new quasi public-private agencies including the River Authority (governmental), the River Foundation (philanthropic), and the Revitalization Corporation (entrepreneurial/development-oriented) support the plan's goals to coordinate the efforts of every agency involved. Of these, the Revitalization Corporation and the River Authority (through the formation of a Joint Powers Authority) are underway, with the establishment of the River Foundation to begin in summer 2010.

Funding for projects related to the *LARRMP* has come from the 2004 Proposition O measure for Clean Water, Ocean, River, Beach, Bay, and Storm Water Cleanup and well California State Proposition 50, the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002.



Rendering of proposed design interventions from the *LARRMP*, 2007.
© City of Los Angeles

²⁸ The other two of the five *LARRMP* opportunity sites include Canoga Park and the Verdugo Wash.

Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan: Public Art Component

“Green the Neighborhoods,” the Fifth Section of the City of Los Angeles’ 2007 *LARRMP* includes specific goals for the incorporation of public art.

Recommendation #5.15: Identify physical opportunities to introduce art along the River.

The *LARRMP* recognizes the history of art along the River and its value to revitalize the River. “Art can inspire, create interest and wonder, offer interpretations, and serve as a way for communities to participate in Revitalization. There is a rich history of art and the River, including murals and the well-known painting of storm sewer covers as ‘River Cats’ by Leo Limón” (5.36). While originally begun as a decorative façade for the River’s stormdrains, Limón’s art has continued as an informal arts practice. However, whereas Limón’s work is celebrated for inspiring generations of Angelenos to become aware of the River, 25 years ago Limón’s may have been deemed illegal or unauthorized.

Beyond Limón’s River Cats, the *LARRMP* references Judy Baca’s “The Great Wall of Los Angeles Mural” on the Tujunga Wash and the Metropolitan Water District’s “Liquid Art” region-wide exhibition. The Plan also acknowledges artistic projects led by nonprofit policy and environmental advocacy groups such as the Friends of the Los Angeles River and North East Trees, including “artistic benches, gates, fencing, pavements, plantings, and other features” to “performances from dance to theater [to film]²⁹ to and music” (5.36). More organically and informally, the River has served as a venue for poetry, drawing, painting, documentary films, and photo essays. “The scale, appearance, and history of the River have made it an iconic emblem of Los Angeles that is not always thought of as a positive reflection on the City,” states the *LARRMP* (5.36). It notes that artistic production has gained a strong legacy along the River through projects that have been both formally permitted by the County and informally produced.

The *LARRMP* emphasizes arts power to support both aesthetic and emotional interpretations for Los Angeles. Broadly defined to include visual art, performances, and activities, the *LARRMP* calls for artistic projects to emphasize key nodes along the River’s gateways, public pathways, and other important areas along the River.

²⁹ The author added film as an important artistic practice that occurs along the River.

Recommendation #5.16: Create a River arts program that reflects and celebrates the history of the River and the diverse cultures of its surrounding neighborhoods.

The *LARRMP* also recommends the development of the River Arts Program where an Interim Art Coordinator would work with other City departments and community members to manage, commission, coordinate, and maintain arts projects. Partnering with City's Cultural Affairs Department and the County, the River Arts Program could draw upon existing public/civic art Percent for Art policies and programs. Eventually, the River Arts Program would be managed by the forthcoming River Foundation, which would work with the "proposed Joint Powers Authority and the Revitalization Corporation,"³⁰ to develop agreements that would establish roles and responsibilities to manage art within the River right-of-way, and regarding cooperation of art activities on public lands and streets within the River Corridor" (5.37).

Also included in the *LARRMP* is an emphasis on diverse and creative passive recreation – "activities that require limited physical exertion and few support facilities" (5.28). Among the examples noted are arts and creative activities such as photography, music, and ethnic dances. These efforts build upon a concurrent plan addressing Los Angeles' lack of recreation and open space, a plan begun in 2006 by the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks Community Needs Assessment. Additionally, the *LARRMP* references peer cases and arts elements found in the plans for Washington, D.C.'s Anacostia River, Chattanooga's River, San Jose, California's Don River, Tempe Arizona's Rio Salada, San Antonio's River, Denver's South Platte River, as well as the International "Sister Rivers" of South Korea's Cheonggye Stream Project and Tel Aviv's Yarqon River.

IMAGES OF THE RIVER

To many in Los Angeles, the River is, at the very least, a conundrum. It is a flood control channel, a concrete ditch, a canvas for graffiti, and a virtual landfill. While these are salient and honest depictions of the River, it was once the lifeblood of the Los Angeles and the very resource that led to its creation and subsequent rapid development. In her article "Remaking American Environmentalism: On the Banks of the L.A. River," writer and River tour guide Jennifer Price made a strong argument for the value and consequences of the River.

"This river is one of the most basic natural facts of L.A.'s landscape. It's the central artery of the major watershed that L.A. inhabits. If we create cities out of nature, not apart from nature, then however a city uses and inhabits its basic natural facts will shape the city profoundly—and will have huge

³⁰ The Los Angeles River Revitalization Corporation is an independent organization established to manage River-associated real estate and development-based transactions for the City of Los Angeles, County of Los Angeles, and Army Corps of Engineers.

consequences—and in fact, the L.A. River has always been central to the past, present, and future of Los Angeles” (543).

To call it a river would be a stretch of the imagination – an assault to the traditional or popular image of a river. It disappears and reappears across the city, a persistent reminder of human interaction with urban nature. “For most modern visitors, the very concept of the ‘Los Angeles River’ has always seemed like an old Jack Benny joke. This is because none of them have ever seen it in full flood,” wrote Mike Davis (69).

The River is even a paradox to popular late night talk show hosts David Letterman and Conan O’Brien. Letterman called it “the last two-lane river left in North America” and Conan O’Brien stated “I never knew that Los Angeles had a river” before screening a comical attempt to canoe down the River with his co-host, Andy Richter.

A River of Unlike Any Other

According to photographer Lane Barden, “Observers frequently describe it as an inadequate ‘trickle,’ undeserving of its status as a river. This trickle is hidden in a box-like ditch called the low-flow channel, and carved deep into the floor of the larger channel. The low-flow channel carries about 58,000 gallons of water per minute – sufficient to support a full riparian habitat (Varnelis 80). Jennifer Price captured the paradox of the River well in her comment:

“This river right here is the reason that Los Angeles exists. The river is a central natural fact of the LA basin. It’s a central artery of the major natural basin that Los Angeles inhabits. Everyone in the country and a lot of people in the world have seen it because it’s in so many movies and TV shows. In the 1930s there were a couple of floods, and LA, which was trying to solve this problem, brought in the Army Corps of Engineers and decided the way they were going to solve this problem was build a big 51-mile ditch, basically a culvert, and put the River in it” (qtd. in “The Los Angeles River”).

But the history of the River is very different than any other. Within a geographic context, the River is inherently southwestern, an area of the United States where canal-like rivers are more prevalent than the wide and flowing rivers of other places. Kevin Starr, Historian, professor, and California State Librarian, framed it best in his forward to Patt Morrisson and Mark LaMonica’s book, *Río L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River*:

“So many of the great cities of the world – London, Rome, Paris, Budapest, New York, Boston, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, St. Louis – are riverside cities. And so is Los Angeles. Yet in contrast to the Thames...the Los Angeles River does not sweep majestically or boast its city in unchallenged supremacy. Ever since it was buried under tons of concrete in the late 1930s, the Los Angeles River has all but lost its identity, at least in comparison to so many other rivers sweeping so arrogantly past their cities...And yet the Los Angeles River, ever present in the history of the city, is inextricably linked to the identity and meaning of the City of Los Angeles” (qtd. in Morrisson and Lamonica 16).

The Real River

But the River is much more than a typical River or a drainage channel. Despite it carrying little water, the physical appearance and design of the River undermines its greater historical value in the context of Los Angeles' development. To fully understand the contemporary image of the River, one must consider what the River was in the past. Prior to its concretization, the River represented a powerful force of strong, riparian, and native habitat devoid of concrete banks and replete with steelhead trout. Today the River flows under the city in a channel 30-feet below street level (Varnelis 82).

This spatial challenge makes it difficult to fully engage with or comprehend the nature of the River. Furthermore, the design of the River's concrete banks does not allow for optimal viewing or scenic vistas. The only place you can really see it is up close. "At that point its vast, empty, graffiti-laden concrete surfaces are alienating and overwhelming in their closeness," said Barden (82). Given this pervasive image, it is no wonder why the current image of the River is perceived in such a negative light. But how does one see a River that is hard to find or replete with access difficulties?

Seeing the River

Landscape photography along the River is a tool that calls to mind various perspectives of the River's current image. In order to fully understand the image of the River today, Los Angeles-based photographer Lane Barden took flight in a helicopter held at an altitude of 400 to 500-feet. In a single flight, with the camera pointed downstream, Barden took over 50 images of the 52-mile river using pictorial references and frames to represent the River in its engineered form, highlighting its relationship with the city as well as supplemental infrastructure. Representing the true nature of the River's landscape, photography such as Barden's shows a unique and creative view of engineering's affect on the River.



Lane Barden's aerial photography of the Los Angeles River (featured in *The Infrastructural City*).
© Lane Barden

In James Corner and Jan Woudstra's book, *Recovering Contemporary Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture*, Charles Waldheim stated, "Picturing the landscape is to infer its renovation" (Corner and Woudstra 83). For Waldheim, the importance of imagining or re-imagining landscape through photography holds tremendous value beyond a visual record. Because it is a medium that can represent so many perspectives, it is "a tool for the construction of space in a world that is created for its potential to be seen" (127).

Notwithstanding, the challenge to define the contemporary image of the River is profound. From its origins as a natural, free-flowing, and soft-bottom river to its current federal classification as a flood control channel and drainage ditch, the River has been modified to a point of un-recognition. For some, its image is driven by a new motivation and commitment to restore the River to one of its previous and more natural states. According to Kevin Starr, "The Los Angeles River has not been lost at all! ... It has merely been transmogrified, like Los Angeles itself, into a post-modernist construction of symbolic engineering. As art, as constructed event, the River now stood interpreted" (Morrisson and LaMonica 16). For others, the River remains a drainage ditch that even if restored, would only provide a cosmetic facelift for the hundreds of gallons of recycled sewage that flow through the canal.

Fortunately, advocacy and activism along the River has generated a renewed sense of interest and awareness in the River's future by residents, not-for-profit organizations, elected officials, and governmental agencies. Today organizations such as the FoLAR, NET, and the Arroyo Seco Foundation have joined forces to advocate, educate, and restore the River's habitat through education and activism. Activities include FoLAR's annual *La Gran Limpieza: The Great L.A. River Clean-up*, annual River rides supported by the Los Angeles Bicycle Coalition and Cyclists Inciting Change thru³¹ Live Exchange (C.I.C.L.E.), pocket parks with locally-inspired public art features constructed by NET, and site-specific art events coordinated by the Arroyo Arts Collective and other individuals and organizations. According to photographer Mark LaMonica and journalist Patt Morrisson, "Today the Los Angeles River represents a 21st century challenge: the preservation of a 51-mile river where nature, commerce, concrete and humanity fight for space, indeed, for their very existence" (LaMonica and Morrisson 1).

For others, like novelist and columnist D.J. Waldie, attitudes about the River have shifted from problematic to hopeful. "As we begin to encounter the river as a place, not as abstraction, we encounter each other," said Waldie. "The riverbank is not the perfect place for this meeting, but it's the only place we have that extends the length of metropolitan Los Angeles and along nearly all the

³¹ Formal organizational spelling of the work "through."

borders of our social divides. Think of the river we're making as the anti-freeway— not dispersing L.A. but pulling it together (A-21).

Hollywood

Perhaps the most notorious image of the River is the cinematic one produced and exported by Hollywood's silver screen. Over 100 movies have been filmed in and around the River, yet very few have contributed to establishing a positive image of the waterway. Classic films include the Academy-Award-winning *Chinatown*, where Jack Nicholson inspects the "dry as a bone" River near the Tujunga Wash, and *Them!*, a 1950s science-fiction action film that depicts an invasion of giant alien ants crawling out of the River's storm drains. Other popular images of the River include the infamous car race at the end of *Grease*³² and more recently, scenes of car chases, fiery crashes, and seedy exchanges in *Terminator 2*, *Repo Man*, *Transformers*, and *The Italian Job*, many of which have made use of the entrance to the River under the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct.

Whereas numerous films and television programs have featured various sites along the River, Hollywood continues to portray the River as a sinister plot location or conflict zone. For filmmakers, the River was a place of danger and violence. The iconic urban form of the River, as it is now, has unfortunately gained a worldwide notoriety as undeniable backdrop for crime, danger, violence and overall iniquity.



Screen still of the infamous Los Angeles River car chase in *Grease*.
© wmanthony.com

³² Filmed in the River's downtown Los Angeles' industrial channel.

In 2003, Thom Anderson produced *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, a unique piece of film criticism about how the urban landscape of the most filmed city in the world serves as a background, character, and subject in numerous films. Understanding Los Angeles is a challenge because it is both a physical and a fictional place. No other city in the world comes close to this dichotomy. By stitching together scenes from over 200 films featuring Los Angeles, Anderson's goal was to cause people to question the way we understand the true realities of a city that are rarely seen. Through this film, Anderson was concerned with dispelling several popular images of Los Angeles landmarks, including the River, that pervade the thoughts of virtually all who think about it.

Of the homes, landmarks, and other Los Angeles spaces featured in the 169-minute documentary, the Los Angeles River is one of the most prominent. "Los Angeles may be one of the most photographed cities in the world, but it's one of the least photogenic," said Anderson. "It's not Paris or New York. In smoggy cities like Los Angeles everything dissolves into the distance and even stuff that's close up seems far off. The river is very sharp and recognizable in comparison to that" (qtd. in "The Fifth Ecology").

A few years prior to Thom Anderson's release of *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, California-based filmmaker, Dana Plays, produced *River Madness* as a project for Occidental College's Re-envisioning the Los Angeles River series supporting FoLAR. Set in a similar format as the Anderson piece, the main difference in Plays' video was her central attention to the River as a backdrop. Instead of narrating commentary, Play stitched the River scenes together to allow for a comprehensive 18-minute survey of the River's image in popular film. According to Plays, she used "point of view for construction and match action to situate the viewer in the cement encased riverbed, its surrounding overpasses, bridges and rail yards, by cross cutting between scenes from various Hollywood movies shot on location in the Los Angeles River³³." Among countless actors and actresses, Plays surmised that film has acknowledged the River as "the ultimate urban location, a place to find refuge, retribution and revenge; a place of death, violence and danger, a place for love, and for *familia*³⁴" Similarly for others, such as German filmmaker Wim Wenders, "Landscapes tell stories and the Los Angeles River tells a story of violence and danger. The L.A. River, as it now exists as a cemented river, has a story of aggression to tell" (qtd. in Kibel 22).

"Long Hollywood's favorite local symbol of dystopia, the Los Angeles River is perceived by many residents as unnatural or non-existent," commented David Fletcher in his essay *Flood Control*

³³ Adapted from filmmaker's website: <http://pages.sbcglobal.net/danaplays/danaplays.html>

³⁴ Filmmaker Dana Play's artist statement for *River Madness*.

Freakology. "This 'narrative of loss' has dominated River discourse for the last quarter century and is used by many to promote visions of bucolic transformations, irrespective of existing land uses and the need for flood control. We need to develop new narratives to understand and appreciate urban watersheds and how they function" (Varnelis 37-38). In this narrative, the Los Angeles River is no longer a single physical entity but rather a "zone comprised of an invisible pattern of ownership and maintenance jurisdictions, railroad lands and easements."

ENVISIONING THE RIVER

Over the last 20 years, there has been a resurgence in the revitalization and re-imagination of the Los Angeles River, with some plans tempered in the reality of what can be done and others radically calling for the removal of concrete to restore the River back to its soft bottom. Although this has developed a new set of constituents interested in the River's future, it has also exposed a hardened reality of the damage that has already been done.

"Though there is understanding the River as it is and as it will be in the future, for the infrastructural sublime, for the *freakological*³⁵, for the river as an artifact," wrote David Fletcher (Varnelis 50). "Certainly, it is unfair to compare our river to the popular Edenic conception of 'river,' with all its associated expectations of tidy bourgeois sentimentalities. Rather, we must reassess the very definition of 'river,' expanding our ideas of 'nature' to include the parrot, the shopping cart, the weed, the sludge mat, and the stormdrain apartment" (50). Fletcher's sentiments support the notion that without reframing the existing landscape of the River and understanding its urban complexities, any plans for its future will be devoid of its advocating for its fullest and most diverse potential. In the words of Jennifer Price, the River is "our once and future icon" ("Environmental History" 142).

Despite proposed solutions ranging from inflatable dams to concrete removal, it is generally accepted that an idyllic view of the River sans-concrete is not an option. In many ways, this poses an opportunity for Los Angeles to reinvent itself and understand a deeper value and perspective of its existing urban landscape. "The big, defining swaths of construction in this city are its infrastructure, not its buildings," said Los Angeles-based architect Eric Owen Moss of the freeways, Los Angeles River, the power grid and the rail lines. "The meaning of the city may not be its architecture" (qtd. in Timberg 3). For Moss, there is hope in shaping the city's social, ethnic, and creative landscape amidst its existing and pragmatic infrastructure.

³⁵ A term created by writer David Fletcher to characterize the unique and non-traditional physical image of the Los Angeles River.

A Plan and Intent to Revitalize

Jennifer Price said it best when she stated “The L.A. River could be a vital, beautiful urban river. To resurrect it means to return it not to its past, but to a state of health. A restored L.A. River would be an unapologetically urban river” (“LA Weekly” 25). Undeniably, although cities all across the country are looking for new ways to address their urban rivers, it is important for Los Angeles to manage its expectations of what its river can be. Fortunately, the opportunities for river restoration are no longer constrained to solely physical improvements, but also social ones too. “Advocates for its restoration would like to turn it into a major social and environmental asset,” stated Price. “A river that shows what a city can do with its river. A river that re-creates the ultimate symbol of what’s gone wrong in L.A. as a symbol of things done right” (25).

The factors that constitute a vital Los Angeles River are indicative of what constitutes a vital urban space in Los Angeles. In the context of the River, “re-vitalization suggests both a revivification of the river in social and ecological terms, and a shift in its status from being a largely dismissed and almost punished site through the Twentieth century, to being re-established as the primary artery and life source that it was before the concrete was poured” (Dinerstein 18). Considering the multiple perspectives vying for attention along the River, reaching a medium on how to construct a local view of the broad notion of “place” along the river is critical. As stated by Dolores Hayden in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, “Place is one of the trickiest words in the English Language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid. It carries the resonance of homestead, location, and open space in the city as well as position in social hierarchy” (15).

Despite strategies to support the creation of healthy social places, the physical context of the River still provides challenges and an opportunity for improved coordination. Along the River, these obstacles range from poor lighting to lack of pedestrian access and activity. In many ways, these existing conditions have created the very derelict image of the River that attracted artists and arts organizations in the first place. Whereas other types of transgressive activities along the River (gang activity, homeless encampments) are often the cause of people’s concern to explore it, artists and arts organizations, whether or not through fully sanctioned and permitted projects, have taken on the River to engage with all of its users and create a space that is inviting for all.

Considering the River’s central location across Los Angeles and the region’s financial center and official Central Business District of downtown Los Angeles, its future will no doubt be affected by development pressures and other economic focal points. The concern here is whether there is room in a revitalized River that places equal value, if not more, on the benefits of social engagement rather than just on local market forces? How can the plans for a future Los Angeles River represent generate

new ideas for the reorganization of the civic space not nominated by the real estate culture so heavily imbedded in large-scale revitalization and renewal projects in Los Angeles?

A Space for Local Influence

Apart from public government and elected officials agencies leading the charge, community-based stakeholders and contributors include individual and organization-based advocates championing recreation, environment, neighborhood quality of life, education, transportation, and arts and culture. Many of these individuals and organizations have maintained a close relationship with the River either growing up in Los Angeles or in their professional careers. Several of the groups have organized as a result of the goals and projects set forth by the River master plans. Typically overlooked, these individuals and organizations established strong, relevant, and thoughtful agendas to be addressed for the River's future. To date, this grassroots nature has illustrated a collective power to influence and transform large-scale urban development projects at a local level.

Echoed in the *LARRMP*'s opening letter by Los Angeles City Councilman and Chair of the Ad Hoc River Committee, Ed Reyes, "Our communities want parks. They want wildlife habitat. They want neighborhood revitalization for our families and children. No one deserves it more than them" ("Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan" 1). Amidst large-scale, public-supported plans for revitalizing the River, opportunities for how to re-imagine the River are resounding and increasingly realistic. In an October 1999 session hosted by Occidental College as a part of its yearlong series, *Re-Envisioning the L.A. River* series, Mary Nicols, secretary of the California Resources Agency, and Felicia Marcus, administrator of Region IX of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, commented, "While the river might not be the [trumpeter] swan in L.A.'s future, it could be a very, very pretty duck," citing Jennifer Price's compelling metaphor used to describe the River in an *L.A. Weekly* feature article, "Paradise Reclaimed: A Field Guide to the L.A. River" (qtd in Kibel 38).

While some advocates and activists are driven by environmental and hydrological concerns, others see the River as a cultural landscape, viewing their work as a creative record into the River's past, present, and future. According to Lane Barden, a restored River would "...provide as yet unimagined cultural interpretations, natural habitat, recreation, and green infrastructure for a city that has become so dispersed, park-starved, and focused on short-term problem solving that its inhabitants are hard-pressed to imagine anything beyond what there river once was and what it has become." Regardless of the form it takes, the River will always remain an important resource, in the city's historical development and in its contemporary one.

A Value for the Future

In the case of the Los Angeles River, the concept of “civic” is quite challenged, primarily due to the fact that it is illegal to be on the River (only small percentage of the river is officially open to the public).³⁶ The entire length of the River is a large no-trespassing zone according to all the agencies that govern the resource. Perhaps poet and river advocate Lewis MacAdams said it best when he stated “We are heading down the river for the first time.” This is not to say that previous efforts have gone without merit but rather, that for many, despite the River’s history in Los Angeles, they have yet to ever see it, no less be a part of its future.

Currents of Change along the River

The Los Angeles River is changing. As more and more citizens and public agencies take interest in its future, it is critical to consider the River in the varied forms and multiple perspectives surrounding its future visions. Not only does this facilitate an understanding of the River, but it also reminds us that the Los Angeles River is neither a traditional river nor a typical inhabitable space.

The River is centrally located in the Los Angeles basin, amidst Los Angeles’ cultural engine. This poses a challenge for not only how to address the River’s design and ecological challenges, but also how to equitably address the public interests of the River’s users and adjacent communities. Although this reality makes it difficult to engage with the River, it also provides the River a welcome advantage - it makes the space more interesting to engage with and more difficult to commodify or capitalize on.

While revitalization is a popular notion, critics argue that that a comprehensive riparian agenda through concrete removal is unfeasible. According to David Fletcher, “The term revitalization implies re-growth as a recuperative agent for societal wrongdoings and suggests that it is desirable to correct the *freakological* conditions in which virtually any invader can thrive...there is as yet little constituency for understanding the river as it is and as it will be in the future, for the infrastructural sublime, for the freakological, for the river as artifact” (Varneliz 50).

And as the River improves, the need to stabilize real estate and housing prices for low-income families and independent businesses becomes more important. Anticipated concerns come in the form of challenges to rezone adjacent lands to replace current industrial uses with more profitable

³⁶ The current governance structure for the river includes local (City of Los Angeles and County of Los Angeles), state (California State Parks), and federal (Army Corps of Engineers) jurisdiction. To date, only a few bike baths along the City of Los Angeles maintenance roads are open to the public. Other areas, including physical contact with the River, is considered trespassing.

ones, especially those supporting downtown's local economic tax base, such as the City of Los Angeles Adaptive Reuse Ordinance. While the prevailing trend to revitalize rivers progresses, it is also important to factor changing conditions in political will, public interest, economics, and land speculation.

In their analysis of urban river restoration in Europe, Sally Eden and Sylvia Tunstall assessed the social and political challenges of environmental management. Proving that this dilemma is not just specific to Los Angeles, they stated:

"Urban rivers have been gradually 'lost' under new surfaces – buried in subterranean pipes with underwater outfalls – because the 'traditional' approach to managing urban rivers in Europe is dominated by 'hard' engineering and can be summarized as: bury them, turn them into canals, line them with concrete, and build upon the (now protected) floodplains" (662).

These issues stem from what the authors call a "deficit model" of understanding between what is expected from citizens of policymakers. As a result, they promote a localized approach to River restoration where "adaptability is used positively by restoration advocates to support their challenge to the restrictive, un-imaginative, and un-adaptable 'one size fits all' standards of the hard engineering approach, because 'there can be one no universally applicable restoration endpoint'" (Eden and Tunstall 665). In this regard, the social, cultural, and political aspects of restoration are considered secondary to science. Furthermore, although public involvement is necessary for urban river restoration, the public are often under-researched and thus, their involvement under-implemented.

Overall, it is necessary to re-consider a range of solutions for our contemporary urban revitalization challenges, shifting from large-scale, multi-decade citywide master plan projects to localized small-scale, short-term, and temporary solutions. With regard to the Los Angeles River, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should look to arts activity along the River to satisfy these solutions. Art and culture echoes a larger value statement about the lack of civic space for social engagement and creative expression in Los Angeles. It has developed a strong community along the River and has sustained a pluralist legacy of culture and diversity representative of Los Angeles' citizens. Art also provides lessons, patterns, and opportunities for how to re-imagine spaces like the Los Angeles River.

Whereas the general public usually disregards the River, artists have found a rich culture and meaning in the resource. What issues arise when urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers want to "revitalize" a resource that already acts as a strong and vital civic space sustained by a marginalized constituency? Prior to moving forward with future large-scale efforts, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should observe and learn from previous and contemporary ideas about art, space, and the civic realm along the Los Angeles River.

“By means of a constant process of reconstruction, memory brings an interpretation of the past out of the present: in the form of collective memory, it strengthens the cohesion of the group in question, it is an integral part of its essence, it is transformed as the group evolves. The same thing happens with space...”

-- Maurice Halbwachs, French philosopher and sociologist

CHAPTER **3**:

PERSPECTIVES ON LANDSCAPE AND CIVIC SPACE

This chapter reviews a host of theories and ideas about place-based interventions and the importance of space in the civic realm. It offers literature on the value of desolate and abandoned spaces as sites for meaningful re-appropriation and creative inspiration through Kevin Lynch’s notion of “waste spaces,” Michel Foucault’s theory of “heterotopias,” and everyday urbanism. This chapter also addresses the importance of respecting ephemeral, temporary, and vernacular activities in urban spaces.

According to noted urban sociologist William H. Whyte, "The street is the river of life of the city, the place where we come together, the pathway to the center" (7). If such is the case, then what is the river's role in the city? Although typically considered Los Angeles' prime example of an urban wasteland, the concrete, abandonment, and dereliction that characterizes the Los Angeles River has created a heterotopic environment that is uniquely Los Angeles – an escape or departure from the region's pervasive lack of civic spaces. While not a typical landscape when compared against the classifications set forth by spatial theorists, the River is, at the very best, an ambiguous, marginal, and in-between space – not completely accessible as a true urban civic space, but also impossible to ignore as the true spine of Los Angeles. Nonetheless, considering noted theories on waste spaces, everyday urbanism, ephemeral/temporary landscapes, and others, the River is a venue of creative expression and imagination that has transformed the urban landscape of Los Angeles.

For this reason artists have come to occupy the space to the degree that is presented in this thesis. The combination of the River being both a meaningful space and a "waste space" has created a sublime ability to convert the space to higher worth. Where other spaces are too formal or present restrictions on the type of art they choose to exhibit, the River is a venue that allows for all types of artistic arts expression. In many ways, the River functions as a user-generated arts district, without the formal classification. This is happening against every formal political or market force, a situation which represents the desire for Los Angeles' citizens to activate the space. The energy is so powerful that it is impossible to ignore or control the social forces of the city. Doing so, especially in exchange for other formalized contemporary attempts to create civic space, will lead to unsuccessful endeavors for both spaces, and therefore, the people of Los Angeles.

THE CONTEMPORARY CIVIC REALM

The New Urban Landscape

In their book, *In Search of New Public Domain*, Dutch political scientists and urban planners Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp broke through traditional urban landscape sensibilities to find "not only virtue, but occasionally beauty, in the new civic spaces of the 21st century: airports, shopping malls, theme parks and popular festivals" (Hajer, "The New Urban Landscape"). They argued that although these landscapes have earned a strong social and civic importance, they are often underutilized or underrepresented when compared with popular civic spaces like *Las Ramblas* in

Barcelona, the *Cannebière* in Marseille, and Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. While Hajer and Reijndorp agreed that these spaces represent a strong public and popular significance – “an integral part of urban identity” – they also realized their new perception of landscape requires a closer examination to what defines a popular space. For Hajer “Being coerced to conform does not tally with this perspective of a properly functioning public domain. Being challenged to relate to others does” (116). For Hajer and Reijndorp, “place is associated with real events, with myths, with history and memories” (33). Their definition of civic space was based on the situations that create a meaningful environment stemming from a vivid past.

Defining Good Civic Space

“What constitutes a good civic space?” is a question that remains at the forefront of most contemporary urban planning and urban design discourse. From extolling the value of placemaking³⁷ to the outgrowth of specialized design guidelines and standards that regulate urban spaces and their adjacent development, the subject draws intense interest from planners, designers, developers, policy-makers, policy advocates, and elected officials. Although it is generally accepted that the result of good civic space design is social cohesion and expression, there still remains a disparity among the value systems relevance to existing urban planning and urban design strategies. Whereas the social components of these spaces are emphasized and lauded, current strategies often revert back to “reducing untidiness, an emphasis on the aesthetic, and a predilection for design” (Hajer, “The New Urban Landscape”).

In his popular book, *Life Between Buildings*, Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl built upon his research on the social uses of civic space and people’s experiences within them. Gehl presented a method for evaluating how design techniques can encourage active use of outdoor space. According to Gehl, “The social changes of our era can help explain the dramatic increase in urban recreation... premium civic spaces, with their diversity of functions, multitude of people, fine views and fresh air obviously have something to offer that is in great demand in society today.” Of Gehl’s various perspectives about the use of civic space, he emphasized the important distinction between necessary, optional, and social activity as well as the value of gradual transformations. Gehl

³⁷ Based on the 1960s ideas of Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, the Project for Public Spaces describes placemaking as a “place-centered approach to helping citizens improve public spaces and make great communities.”

distinguished between the need of necessary/functional activities, optional/recreational activities and social activities in civic spaces.

Gehl argued “while necessary activities take place regardless of the quality of the physical environment, optional activities depend to a significant degree on what the place has to offer and how it makes people behave and feel about it. Social activity is the fruit of the quality and length of the other types of activities, because it occurs spontaneously when people meet in a particular place” (Projects for Public Spaces, “Jan Gehl”). For Gehl, social activities include everything from casual gatherings to organized public communal and creative events. Their success is relative to how they feed off each other. Gehl claimed that gradual transformation in urban development allows for “greater flexibility in the design process and facilitates attitude changes through public involvement and positive experiences” (Project for Public Spaces, “Jan Gehl”).

Civic Space and the Urban Domain

The last 20 years have witnessed the rediscovery of civic space in the arenas of policy-making and design, as well as a simultaneous intensification of the debate about its significance in urban society. Beyond deciphering the factors that constitute a good civic space, it is also necessary to consider the differences between civic space and the public domain. “We define public domain as those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and also actually occurs. In choosing public domain as a contact, we are positioning ourselves in a lively and complex debate,” said Hajer. “Afterall, the term public domain is not only used to refer to physical places in the city, but also has a broader political and philosophical meaning” (Hajer, “The New Urban Landscape”).

The advent of a technology-driven mobile culture has also changed the definition of a civic space. Although its commonplace for people to congregate over online social networks, people have not lost their interest to connect in person. This implies a new agenda for the urban design and planning of civic spaces.

A NEED FOR ORDINARY AND ABANDONED LANDSCAPES

Waste Places

In *Wasting Away*, Kevin Lynch argued for the value of decline, decay, and wasting as a necessary part of life and growth. “We must learn to value them and to do them well,” editor Michael Southworth stated (“Wasting Away” vii). Although Lynch’s early works³⁸ were more pragmatic and

³⁸ Many of Lynch’s books have become standard texts among academic and professional planning circles, especially *Image of the City*, *Good City Form*, *Site Planning*, and *What Time is This Place?*

normative, focusing on the positive aspects of form in urban planning and design, *Wasting Away* represented a logical progression of Lynch's thoughts about the challenges and implications these professions would soon face. As a result, Lynch requested that society acknowledge the waste in our lives as important things and places that would free us from mental or emotional constrictions. He argued that waste spaces provided a valuable and potentially necessary freedom for human development, similar to the benefits associated with adventure playgrounds of the 1940s.

In his introduction to the *Wasting Away*, Michael Southworth observed Lynch's concern that urban planning and design prioritizes man made changes to the environments over the role of natural systems. The profession made assumptions that it could overcome the challenges of natural systems through technology and planning. Yet despite the popularity and predictions of contemporary environmental movements, Lynch's ideas still hold relevance today. "But the limitations of the technology have become all too evident as we struggle to provide water to cities in arid climates, to clean up toxic wastes that contaminate urban supplies, or rebuild cities destroyed by natural disasters," stated Lynch. "It is as important for planners to help places decline or even die gracefully as it is to promote development and growth" (vii).

When addressing abandoned places, Lynch believed that humans' interest in the abandoned places of urban places is often wilder than their interaction with abandoned places in pastoral settings. "At the same time, the ruins retain their evocative, symbolic power. In abandoned places, the release from a sense of immediate human purpose allows freer action, as well as free mental reconstruction" ("*Wasting Away*" vii). Using examples such as a renowned folk art piece made out of discarded glass, rock, and ceramic pieces in a deserted piece of government land in Chandigarh to an Anais Nin tale about children who find more thrill, intensity, and escape by creating a life in an abandoned subway, Lynch described the attraction of waste places as "release from control, free play for action and fantasy, rich and varied sensations" (25).

Lynch also called to mind Denis Wood's notion of "shadowed spaces" from his work, *In Defense of Indefensible Space*, areas which are "screened, marginal, uncontrolled places where people can indulge in behavior that is proscribed and yet not harmful to others – are regularly threatened by clean-ups and yet are a necessity for a supple society" ("*Wasting Away*" 25). The value of these places is their ability to provide a space for free action that should not be viewed as neither wastelands nor "empty, single-function places." They carry a multiplicity of uses and interpretations.

Lynch supported the notion that decline should not be perceived as a local disease. He argued against public policies that encourage growth over declining places due to their harmful and top-driven threats. According to Lynch, equitable urban growth policies should exist "to create flexibility

and diversity at an early stage, to invest in the public amenity that will stabilize a place; to compensate for social costs of mobility to put the control of enterprise in local hands; to capitalize on the hidden benefits of stability, stagnation, and decline" ("Wasting Away" 97).

Lynch also addressed the concept of wilderness in context with waste. Wilderness can be defined by both pastoral and urban characteristics, ranging from unattended natural land to railyards or landfills. In his research on the recreational uses of New Jersey's Meadowlands, Robert Sullivan applies Lynch's theory of waste places to show that "even the most degraded places can be a venue for creative urban recreation, the experience of nature and support alternative narratives of place" (Campo 43). It is in these "wild" spaces that Lynch feels "the acceptable location of the margin becomes a regional issue" ("Wasting Away" 112). "Wastes are traditionally dumped at the edges of settlement – in areas where the powerless live, where land claims are weak, and where controls are soft. We find this phenomenon of the margin at many scales," said Lynch (115). These marginal areas are significant because they maintain a sense of beauty and values, although not according to traditional aesthetic ideals, because they lack the social control necessary to allow habitation by marginal people who may have no where else to go.

Yet the concept of waste was not new for Lynch. A long-time prevalent theme in his manuscripts and texts, Lynch strived to make overall connections to waste central to planning. In his 1962 book *Site Planning*, Lynch focused on the principles of designing and reusing abandoned and derelict land such as rail yards and flood lands and argues that "however derelict they may seem, are likely to be important to someone or some form of life and may be essential to future adaptability" ("Wasting Away" ix). In 1972's *What Time is This Place?*, Lynch made a call to planners to not avoid or ignore change but to deal with it – "to accommodate it, to express it, to celebrate it," as it was an important element in how we perceive and respond to the environment ("City Sense and City Design" ix).

In the books that followed, including 1977's *Growing Up in Cities* and 1981's *Good City Form*, Lynch advocated "waste space" as a place for adventure and freedom from control, as well as in *The Openness of Open Space*, which was Lynch's attempt to revolutionize the scope of open-space planning by "redefining the very concept of open space and emphasizing the human meaning and purposes of such space." With the intention to not limit the concept of open space to conventional parks and playgrounds, Lynch defined open space as "the negative, extensive, loose, uncommitted complement to the system of land uses and human values of open space so defined, and how its performance should be judged accordingly" ("City Sense and City Design" 353).

Later, in *Open Space: Freedom and Control*, an article co-written with Stephen Carr, Lynch and Carr asserted that the challenges and tension relative to open space design are typically due to their over-programmed nature. They stated that “fundamental values, especially possibilities for uninhibited and spontaneous human actions, must never be compromised” (“City Sense and Design” 354). In this respect, the positive value of marginal and unregulated spaces is their ability to stimulate our imagination and excite impulses towards freedom, spontaneity, and individualism.

Heterotopias

In his signature 1967 lecture at the Cercle d'études, French philosopher Michel Foucault argued for spaces where physical and mental dimensions occurred simultaneously. Heterotopias, as Foucault called them, were unique, non-traditional, and differentiated “other places” where the constraints of typical regulations and rules were suspended. “For Foucault and others, these spaces of difference, incongruence or ‘other’ have disruptive and transformative powers and excite the imaginations of those more rooted in conventionally structured, everyday experience” (Campo and Ryan 310). Abandoned and derelict spaces can be described as heterotopias because they are often isolated and penetrable, yet not freely accessible like other civic space. Because of their under-the-radar nature, these spaces invite spontaneous and imaginative reactions from individuals or groups. Foucault supported the value imbedded in their promise and resistance.

Applying Foucault's theories of heterotopia also provides a critical perspective on how to view the growing trend of privatization of civic space. “The contemporary transformation of the city plays a profound redrawing of the contours of public and private space, bringing to the fore and equally treacherous and fertile ground of conditions that are not merely hybrid, but rather defy an easy description in these themes,” stated Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cuater in their introduction to *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society* (3). For Dehaene and de Cuater, heterotopia is all around us, despite the increasing nature of development-driven planning. As spaces grow to be more commodified and controlled, a deeper look into our social interactions shows the need for urban spaces with freer environments.

Vernacular and Cultural Landscapes

Like heterotopias, a vernacular landscape is one that is non-controlled and evolves over time through the activities of its occupants. Whether rural or urban, the meanings found in these landscapes reflect important physical, biological, social, and cultural values.

In *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, J.B. Jackson wrote “There are societies which cannot rest until they have defined every space, natural or man-made, in conveniently human or political

categories. If for instance, there is a river, it is immediately thought of in terms of navigation or water power. If there are mountains, they are to be used for defense or grazing or the providing of wood..." (28). In this statement, Jackson argued against traditional master planning and design strategies that strive to pre-determine and create well-defined spaces for individuals. With a goal to preserve unity, Jackson felt this approach impedes civic spaces. "Yet we can never entirely do without the human basis of spatial organization, for there will be times and places where the space itself is less important than the content, where space simply plays the role of background" (28).

In his essay "Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene," geographer Pierce Lewis stated that "all human landscape has cultural meaning, no matter how ordinary that landscape might be" (15). Lewis proposed seven axioms as a way to understand cultures role and reflection within landscapes. According to Lewis, landscape "provides strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming" (15). For Lewis, there is value in uniqueness – even if it is commonplace, trivial, or haphazard and ugly. Context is also important in that "elements of a cultural landscape make little cultural sense if they are studied outside their geographic (i.e. locational) context. To a large degree cultures dictate that certain activities should occur in certain places, and only those places" (25).

In *Political Economies of Landscape Change*, geographer Don Mitchell revisited Lewis' seven axioms to propose a revised and contemporary framework to address landscape. He argued that because landscape is produced – a physical intervention – "it might indeed have little to do with the skilled work of landscape architects' and it might be shaped, transformed, and even thwarted by any number of contrary social processes (zoning laws, the conventions of architectural or artistic language, riots, eminent domain, organized pressure groups, and so forth. But it is an act of will nonetheless" (34). If we are to understand the role of landscape (why it exists? who creates this?), than understanding its social dimensions are critical.

This concept was considered earlier in W.J.T. Mitchell's introduction to *Landscape and Power*, where he questioned landscape as a cultural practice and considers that it "does not merely signify power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents) itself as independent of human interactions" (1-2). Mitchell's beliefs supported the value of accepting and addressing the landscape through multiple cultural perspectives, especially those from groups that are often largely underrepresented.

In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Reyner Banham applied his own framework for vernacular landscapes to Los Angeles. For Banham, Los Angeles was a successful city largely due to non-traditional urbanism. Similar to J.B. Jackson's fascination with the automobile, "the auto-

vernacular landscape" where the mobile consumer is at the wheel, but the layout of the space is designed for vernacular movement," Banham was inspired by the city's automobile-oriented culture. A noted architectural historian himself, Banham explicitly deviated from traditional design theories to understand the value in Los Angeles's terrain. He wrote "the language of design, architecture and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement" (1971: 5). "Once the history of the city is brought under review, it is immediately apparent that no city has ever been produced by such extraordinary mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics, and culture; nor is it likely an even remotely similar mixture will ever occur again" (6).

In *Scenes from America Deserta*, Banham travels through the American Southwest chronicling his visual and mobile experience of the arid landscape. Through his search, Banham found delight in a landscape unlike any other he has encountered. Focusing specifically on the Mojave Desert in his essay, "Man and Mojave," Banham wrote "The Mojave is my baseline desert, my desert of first instance and last resort" (191). Amidst a time of change, Banham posited that the Mojave represented multiple meanings, far beyond the comprehension of the government agencies that regulate its activities. For this reason, Banham declared "And, chiefly because it is the big backyard playground and sandlot for the affluent folks of Southern California, it gets heavily used, extensively photographed, and massively documented by lots of people" (195).

Banham's observations of both Los Angeles and the Mojave Desert provide examples of urban and natural landscapes that can evolve successfully without traditional planning and design interventions. In order to consider solutions for the preservation the Mojave, Banham applied the notion of "benign neglect" to the Mojave Desert. Would the competition for land and how to use it in the Mojave eventually solve itself? "What is really at work here is that odd desert paranoia, that get-them-bums-outta-my-backyard-syndrome, the fear of contamination of the pure desert by other people with 'impure' interests" (197). Overall, Banham did not believe that standard participatory decision-making processes would eventually please all parties involved.

Perhaps the best encapsulation of Banham's view on the Mojave (and any landscape in general) is that a preserved desert is not a true desert. The true value of the Mojave is "a desert where one is free to go where one will, and do what one will, and take the responsibility for the consequences. The desert is seen as the last and necessary reservoir of that ancient and necessary staple, pure air" (198). The desert, like rivers and multiple other landscapes, are what we make of them. Yet despite the tensions that arise from competition for limited land, their inherent human expression of these spaces is necessary, if not always visible. Banham asked "Does the Mojave, as a desert of definition, define

anything more than a set of human attitudes to a particular piece of territory that we have agreed (or not disagreed) to call *deserta*, abandoned" (206).

Ephemeral Landscapes

In his article "On the Unrecognized Significance of the Ephemeral Landscape," Paul Brassley argued that the ephemeral components of landscape have a significant effect on how it is perceived, used, and evaluated. In different physical settings, both built and natural, people develop different perceptions to their environments. These associations are not static, but change depending on the landscape. According to Brassley, the notion of ephemera in landscape was important because:

"people, and perhaps especially artists, respond to ephemera; second, because the existence of ephemera makes it difficult to produce a reliable evaluation of a landscape at a single point in time; and third, because ephemera are not normally subject to the landscape planning process. The last two points are contingent upon the first: if ephemera do not matter to people, the problems which might arise for landscape evaluation or their absence from planners' agenda are unimportant" (4).

Brassley also discussed the cultural and symbolic importance of landscape and defined it as "a text to be read," a place with important iconographic significance. This may be the case for both visual and performance-based artists, because evoking imagery in landscape can come in many forms. While there are many examples of landscape in popular photography, painting, music, and film in the art of the Renaissance and other classical periods, Brassley claimed that contemporary artists may understand these complexities the best. "Artists, who might perhaps be thought of as extraordinary people, clearly respond (or, at least, some of them do) to ephemera, but so too do ordinary people. This may be at a very simple level, as in enjoying a spectacular sunset, or in more complex ways," said Brassley (4).

In his exploration on the role of ephemera in urban spaces, Mark J. Schuster argued that the image gained by urban creative and cultural events is often more unique and mentally permanent—even if physically temporary—than popular icons and landmarks. These ephemeral activities obscure the role of urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers and favor users of the space to be active and imaginative, rather than passive observers. They also provide a dynamic setting given that the space changes as frequently as the users do. In this setting, people adapt to the exciting conditions present in these environments. These ideas were similar to those of J.B. Jackson who believed "the average American still associates with a sense of place not so much with architecture or a monument or a designed space as with some event, or some daily or weekly or seasonal occurrence which we look forward to or remember and which we share with others, and as a result the event becomes more significant than the place itself" (Moore xviii).

Everyday Urbanism

The concept of everyday urbanism feeds a growing interest and focus on use, rather than form or aesthetic value in the city. Considering the activities we encounter in everyday life, everyday urbanism emphasizes the human and social components of the ordinary and the obscure, the informal and accidental. Activities such as these expand the traditional notion of the public realm and invites users to approach the space with their own planning and design ideals. As we all experience and navigate urban space in very unique but interconnected ways, it is important to recognize that urbanism must be explored from a variety of perspectives. “The everyday city has rarely been the focus of attention for architects or urban designers, despite the fact that an amazing number of social, spatial, and aesthetic meanings can be found in the repeated activities and conditions that constitute our daily, weekly, and yearly routines,” said urban planner, architect, and urban theorist Margaret Crawford in her introduction to the seminal book on the subject, *Everyday Urbanism*. “The utterly ordinary reveals a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices – a conjecture of accident, desire, and habit” (6).

Crawford argued that the value of everyday urban space is that it “stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated and often under-used civic spaces that can be found in most American cities. These monumental spaces only punctuate the larger and more diffuse landscape of everyday life, which tends to be banal and repetitive, everywhere and nowhere, obvious yet invisible” (6). This in turn leads to new areas and opportunities to address liminality.³⁹ Due to its car culture and lack of public open, recreational, or creative space, it is no surprise that Los Angeles is often the leading urban case of everyday urbanism.

Everyday urbanism’s theories are fundamentally inspired by the primary historical French theorists on everyday life in urban space: Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and Michel De Certeau, and by earlier notions established by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Although contemporary urban theorists in the social complexities of space such as Edward Soja and Mark Gottdeiner also subscribe to Lefebvre’s critique of urban modernity, everyday urbanism seeks to activate “the possibility of reclaiming elements of the quotidian that have been hidden in the nooks and crannies of the urban environment,” wrote Crawford. “We have discovered these qualities in overlooked, marginal places, from streets to sidewalks to vacant lots and parks from suburbia to inner city” (7). An expanded definition of marginal also includes “towns or regions which have been ‘left behind’ in the modern

³⁹ In a spatial context, liminality is defined as a space characterized by ambiguity and openness – spaces in a state of transition that allow for personal fulfillment. Turner, Victor. 'Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology'. *Rice University Studies* 1974. 60(3):53-92.

race for progress, [and] evoke nostalgia and fascination, said Rob Shields, author of *Places in the Margin*. "Their marginal status may come from out-of-the-way geographic locations, being the site of illicit or disdained social activities...a social periphery" (3).

Everyday urbanism counters urban design's contemporary fixation with formal the aesthetics of physical form by prioritizing the human, social, and lived experience in cities. Given that the city is the result of social and human patterns and interactions, a traditional approach to urban space design does not produce spaces that consider their truest users. "The intersections between an individual or defined group and the rest of the city are everyday space –the site of multiple social and economic transactions, where multiple experiences accumulate in a single location," stated Crawford. "These places where differences collide or interact are the most potent sites for everyday urbanism" (7).

By being grounded in the reality of the everyday, urban planners and designers have the power to re-purpose the uses of social life in the spaces they are designing. Like Banham, Correy, and Brassley, the temporal nature of these everyday spaces plays a large role and draws from the ideas of Michel De Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. In their concepts of civic space activities, the notion of tactic is critical. "Tactics are a form of everyday creativity," remarked Crawford. "Many of the urban activities we describe are tactical. By challenging the 'proper' places of the city, this range of transitory, temporary, and ephemeral urban activities constitutes counterpractices to officially sanctioned urbanisms" (9).

Like noted urban theorists and urban designers such as Kevin Lynch, Christopher Alexander, and Jane Jacobs, urban planning and urban design's proclivity for large scale and uniform strategies do more to reduce to the vitality of a space rather than to support it. In time, everyday urbanism grew to propose a new set of design values that would connect ordinary social meanings through physical design by valuing the "common." One of the potential reason everyday urbanism has gained widespread interest is in its general non-specificity. However, as cities have evolved, everyday urbanism has yet to account for derelict, hidden, and abandoned spaces that are neither as public as the street nor in a fixed area, albeit invisible at times. As a result, there is room for the development of everyday urbanism to incorporate a broader vision of places that are not formally designed, typically beautiful, or transcendent – places like the Los Angeles River.

Temporary Landscape Design

In 1977, in one of the earliest recorded articles about the topic, the Institute of Landscape Architects addressed the need for temporary open space design. Ranging from vacant and derelict areas in residential, commercial, and industrial areas, these spaces are often eyesores and health hazards. Instead of lying vacant and waiting for public support, there is a value and opportunity to

create potential “play spaces,” ranging from gardens to allotments and play areas. According to the Institute of Landscape Architects, the causes for this dereliction ranged from elaborate public policy processes to financial challenges, especially in times of economic downturns.

In advocating for new, imaginative, and creative temporary uses of vacant space, the article made a strong case for approaching gardens allotments, play areas, and urban farms. Although the examples are specific to Britain, ideas such as incorporating the assistance of artists to forming arts-based associations that “aid local groups in urban areas to provide leisure and social facilities through low cost rehabilitation and imaginative use of space” (“Temporary Open Space” 1976, 7). Using London as a case study, the article found that the only way the City of London could come to terms with large amounts of vacant and derelict open space was to separate their official agendas and defer to the existing collective interests, local knowledge, and labor force in the community. Furthermore, the Institute recommended that voluntary self-help groups are an inexpensive and faster democratic way of deciding these matters.

Like Banham, the article reconciled that instead of letting these spaces remain derelict, it was better to have them activated at any extent, an action that does not imply the need for more damage or destruction. “The more adventurous kids would still get in (as they do now), but because they would be illegal trespassers, they would tend to keep quiet and cause no damage, keeping to the center of the space where they would not be seen. This site must be typical of many; the first and most important step forward would be for people to recognize that they at last have the opportunity to put such sites in their locality to use” (4).

Allan Correy was an early adopter of the importance of ephemeral/temporary landscape design. For Correy, all organisms go through a life cycle where “they are born, grow, die, and decompose. Even great cities, which are often described in biological terms, evolve, develop, and decay” (102). It is only when we change our existing frame of understanding about the dynamic nature of landscapes that we can understand new ways in how to design it for transient populations.

“For a long time now planners and designers have talked about maximum flexibility, and I suggest that landscape designers too should be flexible enough to allow changes to take place, in fact, to encourage change, and perhaps initiate change,” said Correy. “I am not advocating that all our landscapes should be ephemeral; designed today, built tomorrow, rearranged the next day and demolished in a week later to make room for a different whim or fancy, I am however, putting forward the suggestion that there is an argument for designing, constructing and planning temporary landscapes for short and medium term use” (102).

Instead of waiting for options from public agencies, there is a value in activating the space with a range of short-term uses, rather than wait for large-scale and expensive multi-year efforts that only remind us the reasons why so many derelict spaces exist in the first place. Brassley argued that derelict

spaces exist even in well-designed, new, and expensive places like new parks and city plazas – spaces that are intended for various uses, but are often wrapped-in public-private ambiguity. “A temporary landscape may be truly ephemeral one which, by definition, lives and dies within a very short space of time, or it may be one which is constantly changing and being replaced by something else, but the landscape as such may persist for a long time – the components themselves simply come and go,” said Brassley (4). Their success lies in our planners’ and designers’ ability to change our perception about traditional notions of doing things in public, neat, and over-sanitized places.

Take, for example, children’s perception of landscape, as referenced by Lynch in the 1970s. Although adults may not articulate their needs like children do, most everyone feels the need to create and destroy – so why not provide the opportunities for such behaviors to occur in an already changing landscape? “If, under our present system of planning we continue to have parcels of land which are changing their use, and from time to time they remain vacant for short periods of time, than surely it is better to utilize that land for a temporary purpose rather than to leave it lying dormant and a wasted space,” recommended Correy. “So, instead of looking for all the reasons why empty spaces cannot be put to better use, let us start to do some positive thinking and find suitable temporary uses and ways of implementing them” (104).

FINDING VALUE AND VITALITY

Overall, healthy civic spaces result in positive personal experiences that evoke emotions and illicit dialogue about our value systems. While artistic engagement along the River is a typical tool for this, how should urban planning, urban design, and policymaking efforts influence the future physical and social outcomes of the River space, especially through creative considerations for arts and culture? Is the goal of redesigning the River to establish a contrived cultural experience similar to those of lifestyle centers?⁴⁰ Or is the role of the River’s future design to encourage a more organic approach to social and cultural expression dependent on new and existing projects that will activate the space and bring new users to the River space? These challenges point out the shortcomings of civic space design for despite the merits of “placemaking,” there still exists no standard for which to evaluate a successful civic space. Projects that realize this will no doubt be the most successful.

⁴⁰ Lifestyle center is a shopping center or mixed-use development that provides both commercial and leisure amenities.

Although artists along the River activate the space, they do not have the authority to make physical changes to the space. Because artists are always looking for environments to allow people to explore the space through multiple physical and social narratives, many of the artists and arts organizations using the River as a venue or medium for their art. Although a non-traditional application of urban design, these projects push the boundaries of civic space beyond our common ideas. They create a sense of vitality in the River “animated by the people in them, the interface that occurs in their territory, both between humans and the matter of the environment around them, charges them with life,” said Elizabeth Dinerstein, a graduate student of public art studies. It is a location of human possibilities, both positive and negative, a zone for generative frictions” (21).

As cities gain momentum to reshape their waterfronts, critics of standard urban design and redevelopment practices warn against “a loss of reality – that a homogenized, ‘themed’ downtown may erase the honest grit and regional quirks that make cities special” (Miller 60). While the problems of obsolete infrastructure plague many cities, “the challenge for (re)developers and (re)designers is to incorporate the best of both old and new. Market forces, demographics, and political and economic shifts have forced cities to reinvent themselves and establish new realities for their future development. Change is necessary, but it is important to note that the story of these cities is often rooted in creative acts of public art and expression. As stressed in the contemporary research Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Orit Stieglitz and their report, *Children in Los Angeles Parks: A Study of Equity, Quality, and Children Satisfaction with Neighborhood Parks*, elements of arts and culture should be considered in the development of parks and open space. While the relationship between art, landscape, and planning and design has grown in value, the challenge lies in how to approach city changes in a non-generic manner. In this regard, Los Angeles’ changing arts ecology may provide a forum for social and physical cohesion.

The Los Angeles River provides a broad spectrum of layered uses, ranging from environmental to cultural. And while they are not limited to sole creative expression, they are also inherent in developing the social fabric of communities. This is the product of a successful civic space – one that can equitably inform future urban planning and urban design interventions and complement my own future vision of the Los Angeles River’s downstream corridor. Whereas development projects featuring art represent a new era of revitalization, today’s challenges are constructed by the need to allow spaces creative expression, from the City-sanctioned sculpture to non-permitted site-specific dance. Rather than aiming for large-scale or popular artists, Los Angeles has a prime opportunity to promote spaces and opportunities for Los Angeles’ local creative culture along the River. Urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should take a closer look.

"The Los Angeles River. Yes, Los Angeles, yes America, there is a Los Angeles River. And it is grand. It is long. It is powerful."

-- Patt Morrison, author, *Río L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River*

CHAPTER **4**:

TOUR OF ART ALONG THE RIVER

This chapter provides a unique tour of art projects along the Los Angeles River. It begins at the Glendale Narrows, travels through the Lower Arroyo Seco, and ends in downtown Los Angeles. It includes over 20 projects sited in or inspired by the River space, and incorporates a variety of artistic media.

In Los Angeles, the River has earned its place as a unique creative ecology evident in the numerous place-based and site-specific art projects occurring along its downstream corridor. The cultural and historic importance of the River is reflected in the imagery of photographs, poetry, film, murals, sculpture, performance art, dance, new media, music and other art forms found in the River space. This chapter will take you on a tour of River's downstream corridor through the lens of art projects that have both been site specific in or inspired by the River space. I have included an extensive table, as well as a supplementary tour map, listing the majority of site-specific and "known" art projects in the River space in Appendice 4.1. While it was not possible to cover every art project along the River, a supplemental narrative, *Beyond the Concrete*, is located in Appendice 4.2

A Note About Access

Before I begin our tour along the River, I would like to point out some important access information. From its previous natural state to its current concretized one, the Los Angeles River has never allowed for much human interaction. The unruly and unpredictable River's early floods made it difficult to engage in passive or active recreation with the River. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, the Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps), assuming the River would serve no greater purpose than a flood control channel, built countless fences, few trails, and little public access ways or parking (Linton 8). Those interested in accessing it had to find their own way to the River, through gaps in fencing, backyards, parking lots, and across bridges and railroad tracks. While I am not suggesting unsafe access to the River, it is evident that people have begun to reclaim the space as one for walking, jogging, cycling, general enjoyment, and creative inspiration. Yet despite public efforts to address people's interest for new recreational opportunities, much of the River remains officially closed and off-limits due to poor access and signage.

GLENDAL NARROWS

I usually find that if anyone is familiar with any part of the Los Angeles River, it is most likely the stretch the alongside Riverside Drive, between Griffith Park and Elysian Park, two of the region's largest open spaces. This portion of the River is known as the Glendale Narrows. Not only is it the longest soft-bottom portion of the River's 52 miles, but it is also the area undergoing to most recent infrastructural and environmental improvements, such as new trees and new parks. These include small pocket parks like Oros Park and Marsh Park and large parks like the State-managed El Rio de Los Angeles State Park at Taylor Yard.

My tour of the River begins at the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge⁴¹. Starting at the base of the bridge at the corner of Los Feliz Boulevard and the off-ramp of the Golden State (I-5) Freeway (directly below the Alex Baum Bicycle Bridge⁴²), walk down the ramp that connects to the Los Angeles River Bike Path. Pass under the steel electric generator and veer to the right along the asphalt road that borders the shrubbery and walls that separate you from freeway. Despite the hum of cars, the area is peaceful and provides a unique view of the Bridge. It is also one of the same views that inspired photographer Stephen Callis' Public Works series as well as a Lewis MacAdams poem.

Public Works (2006)

Stephen Callis
Photography

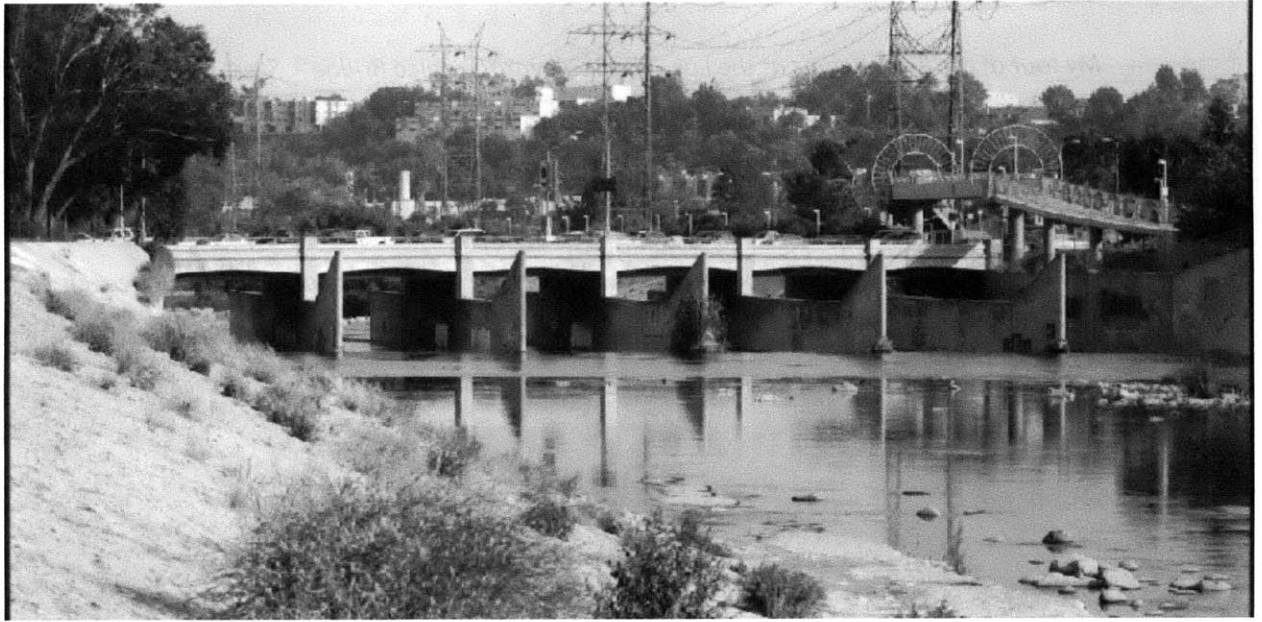
Compared to the rest of the historic River bridges, the features on the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge are modest. Originally called the Tropico Bridge when it first opened in 1925, it was damaged by floods in the 1930s.

To Callis, the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge was just one of a series of landmark bridges that reflect Los Angeles' exponential population growth. In an effort to share his appreciation with a larger audience, Callis photographed the 22 River bridges from the Glendale Narrows to Washington Boulevard. He titled his project Public Works, a reference to the intent of Los Angeles' early civic leaders to build bridges and become the largest metropolis in the west. Beginning with the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge and heading downstream, these bridges include both historic and non-descript bridges, viaducts, and pedestrian footbridges/paths. According to Callis, in his artist statement about his Public Works series:

"My interest in the L.A. River came from my interest in the history of the city and the large role the river has, and continues to have, in shaping the city. The city was founded on the banks of the river because it was the only large reliable source of water in the region. It is the reason the city is where it is. Curious about the way the river looked, this led me to investigate its history and relationship to the city. I found that the way the river looked was a result of its history. In this way, the bridges over the river have also been shaped by the history of the city to which they belong."

⁴¹ Tropico was the name of the southwestern section of the town of Glendale. After the Pacific Electric Railway brought streetcar service to the area in 1904, Glendale was incorporated in 1906. It annexed Tropico in 1918.

⁴² The Alex Baum Bicycle Bridge is named after a local bicycle advocate. Artist Paul Hobson designed the two bicycle wheels at either entrance.



Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge.
© Stephen Callis

Poet and River advocate Lewis MacAdams imagined the destruction of the Tropico Bridge in a poem.

1

Lewis MacAdams
Poetry

Los Feliz Blvd Bridge:
The flood water watchers
feel the power of the river
roaring underneath their feet
as the rain pelts the pavement,
swelling the river even further.
This bridge went out in the flood of 1936⁴³.
A tree trunk broadsides
The bridge's buttresses.
At 30 m.p.h., the whole structure
takes a shock. All of us feel it
in the dark. We laugh nervously,
caught in the headlights
of a video van.

⁴³ Several historical accounts also list 1938 as the year of this massive flood.

Starting at base of the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge you see five fin-like concrete pylons, each approximately 300-feet in length. Apart from supporting the constant flow of traffic along Los Feliz Boulevard, these pylons have also acted as the canvases for graffiti art. In 1995, they served as the backdrop for College Dance Theater's production of Mother Ditch.

Mother Ditch (1995)
Collage Dance Theater
Dance

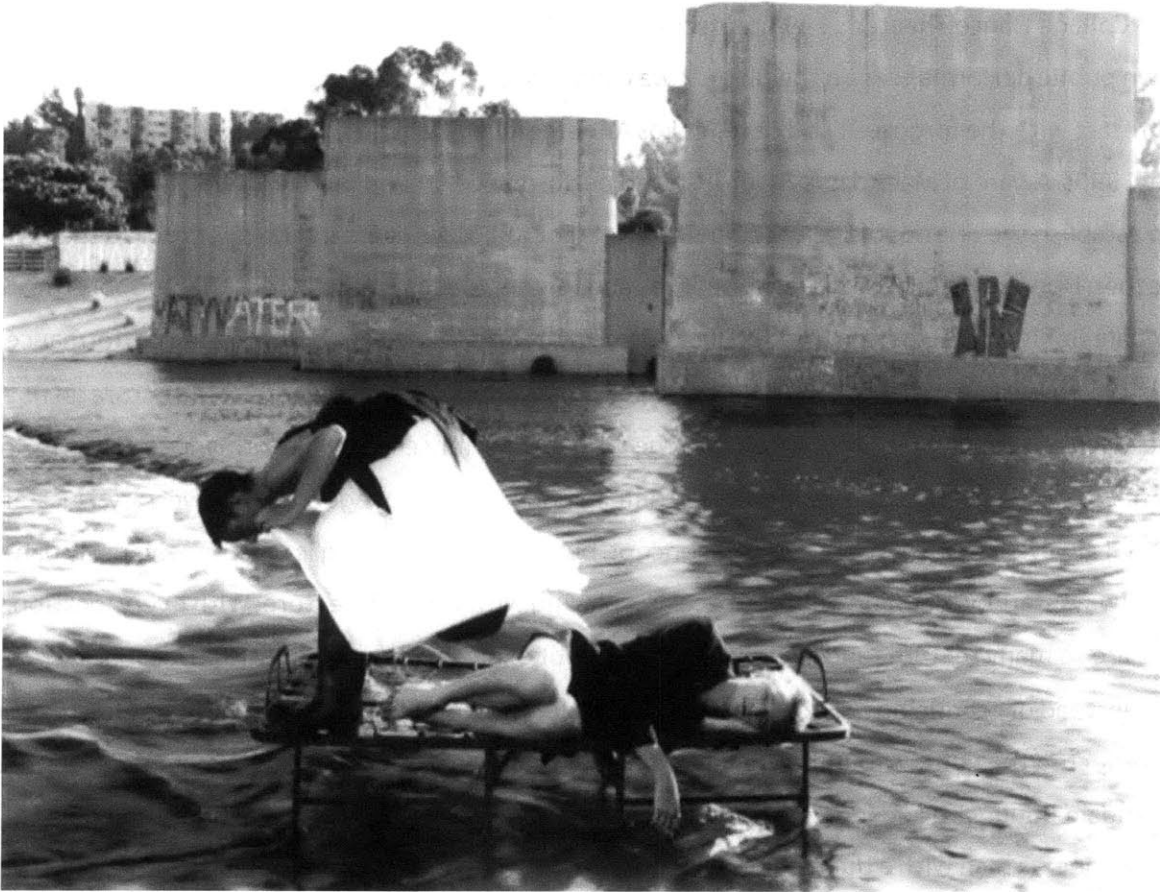
Collage Dance Theater's 1995 performance of Mother Ditch stands out as one of the earliest known public performances on the River. It was borne out of artistic producer Heidi Duckler's interest to interact with the forgotten and derelict Los Angeles River. Duckler met Lewis MacAdams in the early 1990s. Aware of MacAdams' River-inspired performance art and poetry, as well as his efforts to help establish the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), MacAdams and Duckler toured the River together. Upon reaching the large, horizontal, and rectangular concrete pylons that support the Glendale Boulevard/Hyperion Bridge, Duckler knew she had found the right site for a performance.

With a focus on site-specific dance, Duckler creates performances where architecture is "not just a backdrop but completely integrated into the whole experience of the performance" (Josephs). In a recent *Los Angeles Times* Culture Monster profile in honor of the Collage's 25th anniversary, Duckler stated "I always start each project with a concept, but otherwise nothing is pre-conceived. My dancers and I always start by mapping out the space and playing with the architecture. With every location, there are so many textures and layers, and it's all about exploring the possibilities" (Josephs).

Instead of producing a piece for dancers, Duckler incorporated a variety of elements and groups that reflected the culture found in the River's diverse adjacent communities. She combed the streets of Glendale Boulevard and found an accordion school, a Harley Davidson club, a gospel choir, a mountaineer, a man with a dune buggy, members of the native Tongva nation, and a farmer. Accordion players, Harley fanatics, and the gospel choir provided the music; while the mountaineer scaled the pylon; the dune buggy provided special effects; and the Tongva representative danced and blessed the River, the Nation's original homeland. The production also included projections on the concrete banks by B.J. Krivanek.

Although the River was said to be toxic, Collage did not conduct any official toxicity tests. Tickets were sold for \$10 a piece and a bus was rented to bring Westside patrons from the Federal Building in Westwood to the River. Residents in the homes facing the River also gathered to watch two dancers, clad in rubber boots and hazmat suits, interpret new ways to interact with the concrete forms and River debris that typically characterized the River.

Michael Alexander, executive director of Grand Performances, one of Los Angeles longest running free presenting organizations, commissioned Collage to create a piece on California Plaza's fountain during their 1998 season. When asked about Ducker, Alexander said: "She attracts people who are often not your typical modern-dance audience, and she gets them to go places they'd otherwise never visit. Then she helps them interpret those spaces in fresh and interesting ways," (qtd. in Josephs).



1995 performance of Mother Ditch under the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge.
© Collage Dance Theater/Heidi Duckler

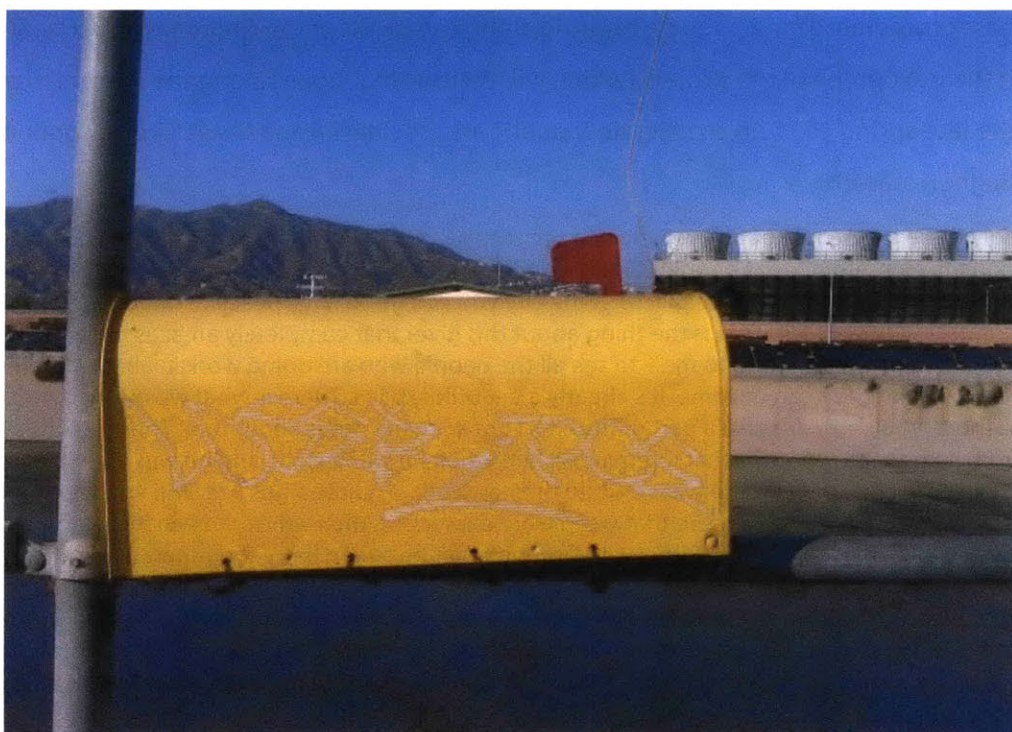
South of the Bridge the River channel is a little over 200-feet wide and includes two islands (one large and one small) filled with sycamore and cottonwood trees. Directly across is the River's eastern bank and the Atwater River Walk. One of the first and largest pocket parks along the Glendale Narrows, the walk includes an old oak tree, shade, benches, and a yoga stretch par course (with quotes from Nelson Mandela and Helen Keller). Over 100 rocks surround the base of the River's trapezoid-shaped walls. Walk under another two electric generators

and a stormdrain until you reach the nondescript Sunnynook Footbridge⁴⁴, one of only two pedestrian bridges along the River. The western entrance to the bridge served as a site for LA Yellow Box.

LA Yellow Box (2008)

Orameh Bagheri
Text-based Public Art

The origins of LA Yellow Box begin in early December 2008. Orameh Bagheri, artist and creator of LA Yellow Box, took a bike ride along the Glendale Narrows one afternoon to clear her mind. A routine ride for Bagheri, she found the River to be a place of inspiration not only for herself, but also for the multiple communities living in and along the River. Interested in creating a text-based, temporary public art installation, Bagheri began to document the River through photography and video. Next Bagheri proceeded to install yellow mailboxes (three in total) along various publicly accessible points in the Glendale Narrows. She originally planned for five mailboxes, but due to their temporary sitting (the mailboxes were only tied to pole by twine), few survived. The project lasted three months.



One of the first LA Yellow Boxes installed on the western entrance of the Sunnynook Bridge.
© LA Yellow Box/Orameh Bagheri.

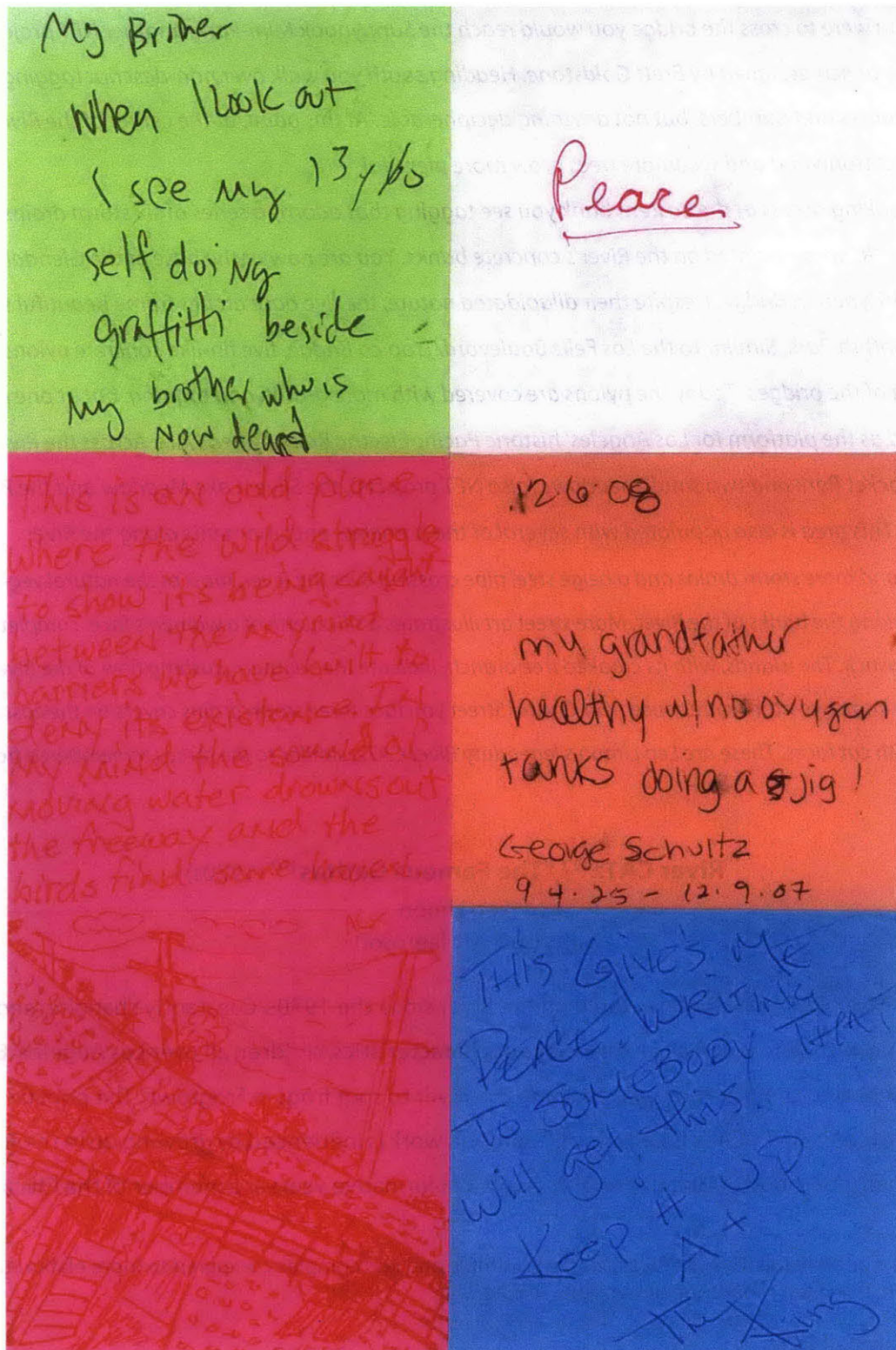
⁴⁴ Commonly referred to as the Atwater Footbridge.

Bagheri's process was simple. Every week, she would post a new question on each mailbox, ranging from "Who are you?" to "What is your vision for the River?" Leaving paper, pens, and markers, walkers, bicycle riders, community members, the homeless, and other River users began to interact with the project and answer Bagheri's questions. Perhaps one of the most colorful answers came from a child who shared their vision of seeing colorful whales in the River. Since late 2008, she has collected over 190 notes.

Bagheri began the project without an audience in mind. Overall, she was interested in generating advocacy regarding conservation, urban development and urban planning, public art, transportation, and mobility through Los Angeles. Bagheri herself has been an active participant in many of the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan's (*LARRMP*) public outreach meetings, especially those concerning local pocket park development and bicycle path improvements. "There are so many people already using the River and interacting with the project, from Latino families who go to the River to fish to street artists. Many of the notes and responses I've received are about people's personal feelings and connections with the River," Bagheri stated.

Bagheri is currently preparing a large temporary installation – via video projection – of the notes she has accumulated for a public screening along the banks of the Glendale Narrows. She is also working on the next phase of the project, which will include mailboxes along the Lower Arroyo Seco, to launch the late spring 2010. In an interview public art specialist Anne Marie Gregg conducted with the artist, Bagheri stated:

"Luckily there are people out there who can see the value of the River and who can see how it can develop into something that people can experience and can get joy from, with all the stress of living in the city and everything, there are places in the city you can go to have peace of mind, or meet people, or just connect with yourself. That is the thing about this River that completely amazes me and the direction that it's going in is fascinating to me – to see all the people who are doing work in all the different ways, to see what this space can become. It's already a beautiful space. There is what we might consider graffiti down there, you know, it's also a part of the city. I got so many notes about that. There was this one note I got from somebody who said that it reminded him when he was a child, and he was with his brother, and they would go and spray on the walls and do their artwork. You see signs like 'Will you marry me?' out there. So there are things out there that people are expressing themselves, I mean it's a form of expression and communication within a community that has been there for generations and generations. So it's about respecting the different aspects of the purpose of that River, and respecting the communities that live along the River, and also how to develop that and create a city where we can all enjoy this space maybe in a different way that we haven't thought was possible. And I think art is a very important part of that. I know that there are some ideas out there on how to utilize that space, but I think all of these elements are a part of our culture."



A montage of notes collected from pedestrians, community members, the homeless, and gang members along the River who engaged with LA Yellow Box prompts.
© LA Yellow Box/Orameh Bagheri.

If you were to cross the bridge you would reach the Sunnynook Mini-Park, another NET project featuring a bench designed by Brett Goldstone. Heading south you walk over non-descript tagging.⁴⁵ It includes names and numbers, but not anything decipherable. At this point, at the center of the River, the islands of cottonwood and sycamore trees grow more plentiful.

Looking across at the eastern bank you see tagging that adorns a series of six storm drains. Next to it the letter "R" spray-painted on the River's concrete banks. You are now at the base of the Glendale Boulevard/Hyperion Bridge. Despite their dilapidated nature, the five base arches frame beautiful scenic vistas of Griffith Park. Similar to the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge, five fin-like concrete pylons jut out only south of the bridges. Today the pylons are covered with more graffiti and tagging, but at one point they served as the platform for Los Angeles' historic Pacific Electric Railway Red Cars. Across the River is the Red Car Pocket Park and two small meadows (also NET projects), the Silver Lake Meadow and the Petite Meadow. This area is also populated with several of the homeless encampments along the River.

Beyond more storm drains and a beige steel pipe crossing over the River, most of the natural vegetation is clustered along the banks of the River. More street art illustrates a silhouette of a woman's face, complete with vivid red lipstick. The islands, with its crooked tree branch, indicate the southern, rushing flow of the River. Upon reaching a large two-story warehouse near Crystal Street you face three storm drains covers on the eastern bank painted with cat faces. These are Leo Limón's legendary River CATz, similar to the three I remembered from my childhood.

River CATz⁴⁶ / "The Famous Gatitas"⁴⁷ (1970s)

Leo Limón
Visual Art (aerosol)

The River CATz have been a staple on the River since the 1970s. Constantly changing and reappearing with different facial expressions or characteristics, children all over Los Angeles' Eastside remember seeing them as they walked along the River to spot frogs in Frogtown. The popular artist behind the iconic River CATz is Leo Limón⁴⁸. Limón's work is influenced by growing up in the River-adjacent neighborhood of Lincoln Heights, as well as formative years as a member of the Chicano Arts

⁴⁵ A form of signature used by graffiti artists that is simple and less complex compared to more elaborate styles of graffiti art. It is often monotone or two-tone in color.

⁴⁶ Artist spelling of CATz.

⁴⁷ The Spanish word for small cats/kittens.

⁴⁸ Limón attributes the painting of the original cats to Mrs. Jackie Meyer and her husband, who painted the original cats along the stormdrain covers of the Glendale Narrows in the 1960s.

Movement. Regarded as the unofficial “Arts Ambassador of East L.A.,” Limón has been painting the RiverCATz for over thirty-five years.

Today Limón continues to traverse the River on his cruiser bicycle, painting “the famous gatitas” as a means to recognize the River as a historic region, cultural arts enclave, and tourist destination. These storm drains are circular with two triangular shaped hinges at the top. His work on the River has evolved from an organic, informal, and non-sanctioned arts process to one that has been celebrated and commended by elected officials and public agencies across Los Angeles.

Often dedicated to a specific person in Los Angeles, Limón’s goal with the River CATz is both physical and social – providing an aesthetic improvement to the River’s storm drain covers while working with community members along the Elysian Valley to raise awareness about the River’s historic and creative roots. Apart from the River, Limón produces other visual arts work that often draws on the themes from the L.A. River. These include the bicycle-themed benches along the Fletcher Drive entrance to the River, the design for FoLAR’s 1993 and 2003 *La Gran Limpieza*, The Great L.A. River Clean-up commemorative t-shirt, and a limited edition 12-color lithograph, *Buenos Dias, LA*, which depicts a scene of the River from Atwater to Long Beach. Additionally, the Studio for Southern California History honored Limón with a profile in their 2010 annual calendar, one featuring the historic bridges of the Los Angeles River. “It’s important for people to know that the River’s walls can be used for creative and temporary interventions that can create change and engage with local communities on multiple levels,” said Limón.



Leo Limón’s River CATz.
© Leo Limón

The next major landmark you reach is the Fletcher Drive Bridge, where the Friends of Atwater Village intend to create murals on the concrete piers that support the bridge. When you cross under the Bridge you will be in Rattlesnake Park, a pocket park built by North East Trees (NET). Look northwest from the stone-formed serpentine benches and snakehead (doubling as a faucet). Also notice the River-rock stairway that leads down from the gate. There you will see the sculptural ironwork of Brett Goldstone in the Great Heron Gates.

Great Heron Gates (1999)

Brett Goldstone
Sculpture (ironwork)

An artistic interpretation of the wildlife of the Los Angeles River, Goldstone's Great Heron Gates serve as a welcome to visitors of the River and the series of pocket parks planted by NET. Made of wrought steel, the gates were commissioned and funded by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), a branch of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC) that manages a large portion of Los Angeles County's open space (including the River). They were the first of its kind in the Glendale Narrows—a welcome departure from the usual chain-link or barricaded fences installed along the River.

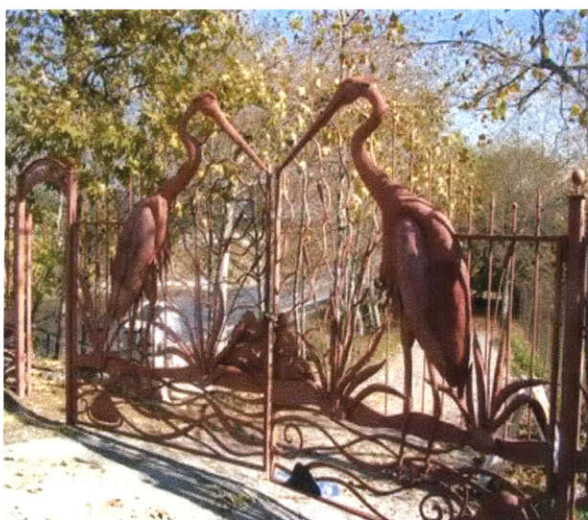
Instead of opening up the request to a wider pool of artists, the MRCA preferred to work directly with FoLAR with a budget of \$20,000.⁴⁹ Former Mayor Richard Riordan commemorated the Gates at FoLAR's 10th Annual *La Gran Limpieza*, L.A. River Clean-up and Earth Day celebration. Reddish-brown, almost rust-colored, the imagery Goldstone featured on the gate included the native flora and fauna and animal life in the area, such as the Great Blue Heron, willow trees (depicting the upstream mountain ranges), and a city skyline (depicting downtown Los Angeles), all moving in sequence from left to right, illustrating Los Angeles development from its natural beginnings to its built metropolis. "My gates are a way to see visions and image of nature in urban areas and pocket parks, despite the real image being arrested," stated Goldstone.

Goldstone gave the Great Blue Heron prominence in the gate, especially considering how it is the largest bird living in the Glendale Narrows as well as the unofficial symbol of the Los Angeles River's future and revitalization. In fact, it is the official icon of the Los Angeles River signs. "The contrast that Goldstone is intentionally drawing out might have been an attempt to problematize this relationship and force visitors to consider their own connection to the Los Angeles River. By provoking that interface between people and their environment, Great Heron Gates does indeed add

⁴⁹ This \$20,000 budget was strictly for fabrication and artist fees. Along with most officially approved public art along the River, no money is allocated for maintenance.

vitality to the site,” said Elizabeth Dinerstein in her assessment of the project for her USC masters thesis on public art studies (24). According to Lewis MacAdams “Brett’s gate was a crucial step in the revitalization process, the first human construct built to welcome people to the river” (qtd. in Dinerstein 28). Beyond mere aesthetics, Goldstone’s Great Heron Gates represent the continued partnerships and coordinated efforts of public and private agencies working towards comprehensive goals for the River’s future.

Prior to creating the Great Heron Gates, Goldstone had a previous artistic and cultural connection to the River. With his home/studio located on Lincoln Heights, Goldstone began working on the River in the late 1980s. Having come to Los Angeles from New Zealand, Goldstone was a co-founder of L.A. Experimental Works, which he used to organize infamous Fourth of July shows, the illegal L.A. Steamworks shows, and the “un-insured” River Festivals. Perhaps the most memorable elements of Goldstone’s Fourth of July shows at the River were his kinetic sculptures (steam, water, or wind-powered). At the 1991 Fourth of July show, the Los Angeles Police Department handcuffed Goldstone for driving one of his sculptures into the River and under the North Broadway Bridge, in front of an audience of over 100 people. At another event on the Avenue 64 Bridge over the Arroyo Seco, Goldstone lit the bridge with turbine power generated by River water. And for the installation that took place in his home, he chartered a rusty yacht and built a 40-foot miniature suspension bridge as a part of his Crossing the Bridge is an Act of Faith performance. For Goldstone, the value of these projects was to raise intergenerational awareness of the River.



Brett Goldstone sculptural gates: Great Heron Gates and Water with Rocks Gate.
© LA Creak Freak/Joe Linton/Friends of Atwater Village.

On the opposite corner of the Fletcher Drive Bridge, directly across from Rattlesnake Park, is another one of Goldstone's gates, Water with Rocks. An award-winning project, Water with Rocks earned Goldstone a commendation from the California State Assembly. The gate shows curvaceous images of various waves along the River and prominently features the downtown Los Angeles skyline in the background. Next to the gate is another Goldstone piece, a bench made out of a large boulder and curved metal.

Goldstone has since gone on to create other projects a gate for Ballona Creek at Centinela Avenue, and a gate for a River-adjacent pocket park further downstream in Maywood. Apart from his previous River-inspired performance art and sculpture, Goldstone's largest dream is to create a 1,000-foot-high Great Blue Heron with one foot on one bank of the Los Angeles River and the other near Lincoln Heights. He intends for visitors to go through the neck to view the watershed from the giant heron's eyes or possibly travel under it through via the MTA's Metro Rail Gold Line or Amtrak trains.

Before you leave the park, stop to read Lewis MacAdam's River poetry etched in a river stone bollard near the Great Heron Gates. Just south of Rattlesnake Park begins an informal district of light industrial uses, mostly warehouses, factories, and food packing plants along the River's western bank. At this point the River channel is mostly comprised of one solid island – a mass of sand, trees, and other native vegetation. The island continues as you cross under the Glendale Freeway overpass, where you see more incidents of tagging and light-industrial land uses. TRS. IFRK. FAA. These letters are drawn across the River's concrete walls, each one of them an icon. After the fourth large warehouse, you will see an entrance to green space. This is Marsh Park, another NET project. It was also an inspirational space for poets Russell C. Leong and Huang Yibing.

Untitled (2001)
Huang Yibing
Poetry

In 2001, the *Los Angeles Times* published an interesting article titled "Along the L.A. River, Poetic Inspiration." In a Special to the Times, Russell C. Leong, author of *Phoenix Eyes and Other Stories* and editor of UCLA's *Amerasia Journal*, recounted a visit to the Los Angeles River's Frogtown area with his friend and fellow Asian poet, Huang Yibing. Leong described their environment as the following: "We look at the stagnant dark water in the big concrete gully. Islands of weed, branches and plants float in the concrete channel. Heat rises from the ground where we stand," (Leong). "So it's not the Yangtze," his friend Yibing replied. Now, after two years in Los Angeles and in preparation to leave for a teaching job in Connecticut, Leong brought his friend to experience the River. Waking along the channel surrounded by electric towers, railroad tracks, and modest residential homes, it was evident

why the space is both peaceful and inspirational. "That's what I like about L.A.—a writer can be alone with his thoughts and not freeze in winter," said Yibing (Leong). Inspired, Yibing wrote the following:

... all of a sudden
we find turtle-like rock
or rather, a stone turtle
slowly carrying its body
as if trying to pull itself
(on the verge of annihilation)
out of the flowing sand. . . .
ancient sacred spirit
we meet you
faraway in a foreign land
do you remember still
your once-noble origin and
language?

About 400-feet after the Glendale (2) Freeway Bridge, the solid island becomes centered again, the River's flowing water now surrounding it on both sides. Shortly after passing a storm drain on the River's eastern bank, the island's solid mass transitions to hug the western bank. Sand, sediment, and debris are at your footsteps. From this point, it is actually difficult to see the River given the length of the trees. Walk alongside the island past the rows of trees, many of which are now double rows. As you reach the residential district again, you notice more huge multicolored graffiti on both banks, most of which spells "Frogtown" or "Toonerville," noting the prominent gangs of the area. You also see the Elysian Valley Gateway Park, the earliest of NET's parks, which opened in 1995. These are also features in the Los Angeles River Bicycle Park, which includes a bike maintenance area, artwork from Brett Goldstone and Leo Limón, and a significant stretch of the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail.

The Juan Baustista de Anza Trail / Mural (1996)

National Park Service / Frank Romero
Heritage Trail / Mural

Throughout the span of the Glendale Narrows, small trail markers outline the Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail. Administered by the National Park Service, the trail commemorates the 1775-76 expedition that de Anza led from Sonora, Mexico to San Francisco, through Alta California, whereby 21 missions, four presidios (San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco), and two pueblos (Los Angeles and San Jose) were established. The expedition consisted of 38 soldiers and their families—198 people in total—and 1,400 miles across the Gulf of California, southern Arizona, and along the California coast (Linton 94). On February, 21, 1776, de Anza wrote a diary entry about

departing from the Mission San Gabriel and across the Rio Porciúncula (Los Angeles River). Both de Anza and other accounts describe a River that is full of water, verdant, and lush. To commemorate the de Anza expedition, Frank Romero, a Los Angeles-based artist who works part-time out of his Frogtown studio, painted a mural incorporating the indigenous Tongva iconography of the region's natural environment along the River's eastern bank.



Romero De Anza mural in Elysian Valley.
© flickr.com (AuntyLaurie)

A significant stretch of railroad tracks line the eastern banks of the River. The adjacent Rio de Los Angeles State Park features various pieces of public art, including River Bench by Suzanne Siegel. The area is lush – it is evident that nature is retaliating under the concrete. Birds circle the area, Latino families line the banks to fish during the weekends while birdwatchers search for elusive Snowy Egret. Water flows gently past an abandoned car jutting out from sand, rocks, and wild plants. Above the River, you'll see dilapidated houses with "For Rent" and "For Sale" signs. The area is also the location of the Bowtie Parcel, where Cornerstone Theater Company's staged their production of Touch the Water: A River Play.

Touch the Water: A River Play (2009)
Cornerstone Theater Company
Theater

Touch the Water: A River Play was the fourth and final offering in Cornerstone's Justice Cycle, a four-year series examining the positive and adverse effects on "how laws shape and disrupt" communities. A nationally acclaimed multi-ethnic ensemble-based theater company, Cornerstone has been building bridges between diverse communities in Los Angeles and nationwide for over 20 years.

Written by Julie Hébert and directed by Juliette Carrillo, Touch the Water was produced through the lens of environmental justice. Paying special attention to the people who engage with River, the play mixed contemporary characters, live music, and Native American myth. Signature to Cornerstone's approach, it was created with local River residents and featured 22 performers, many whom had never performed before, but held strong personal connections to the River. These included a biologist who lived and worked in the River, a Native American woman who grew up near the River, residents and artists in Frogtown, and many others – a collaboration which led to a cast of both professional actors and community participants. The cast performed the play fifteen times between May 28 and June 21, 2009 at the Bowtie Parcel in the Rio de los Angeles State Park in Cypress Park. The audience included over fifteen hundred people; many of these people attended pre- and post-show lectures and River tours with local experts and advocates. Cornerstone conducted interviews, story circles, and research from May through November 2009.

The plot revolved around Luis, a homeless and recently paroled alcoholic and Isa, a River resident distressed because her thirteen-year-old brother had fallen victim to gang murder. Other characters included a poisoned sea turtle; a Native American ghost; fanciful humans dressed as River wildlife; local residents; contemporary advocacy figures such as Joe Linton, who played an employee of the Army Corps of Engineers; and Lewis MacAdams, who played Roger Vadim, an activist with a jackhammer. In a quote from Roger Vadim's opening script:

"Touch the water, man, that's the instruction from the gods, touch the water where you live or you will not know where you are.

(Looking and listening to the rich river world)

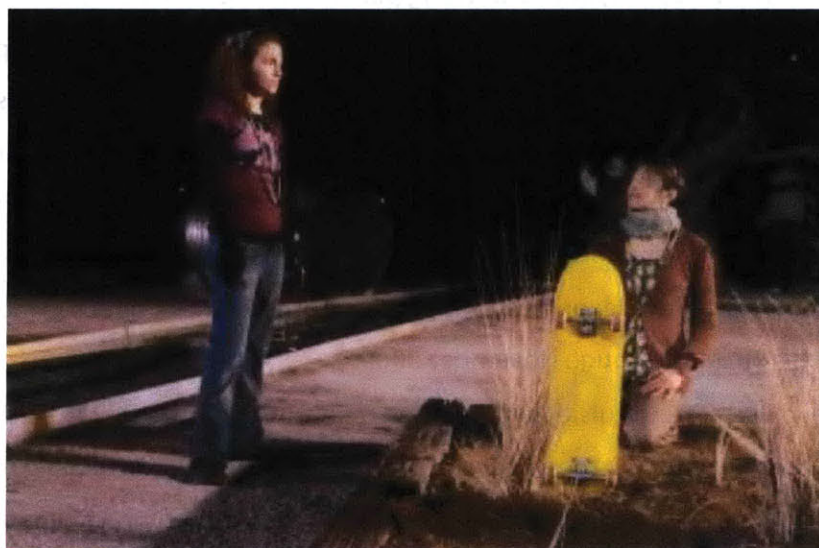
This is why people in L.A. feel disconnected, we can't touch our water.

Can't even see it. Most people don't even know we have a river – a fierce Western river that's the reason the city was founded here – the sole, soulful, source of water for thousands of years. When people say there is no center in Los Angeles, no there there...what they don't know is the River is the center – and she has been eclipsed, hidden under a concrete shroud. But the Mighty Los Angeles is not dead, she flows underground."

The production incorporated found objects for the stage design and included a band. It was

produced in association with community partners including the Metabolic Studio/Farmlab, FoLAR, Elysian Valley Recreational Center, California State Parks, Bedlam Magazine, Occidental College, Communities for a Better Environment program, Friends of the Atwater Village, and the South Asian Network. Through these diverse partnerships, Cornerstone reinforced the value of community participation and respect for multiple perspectives. According to Stephanie Campbell of the Los Angeles Sector of the California Department of Parks and Recreation:

"Our Los Angeles Sector Office, focused on establishing State Parks in underserved urban areas, is also actively interested and engaged in Los Angeles River Revitalization efforts. Throughout our planning process, the community has consistently emphasized the paramount importance of re-establishing connections to the Los Angeles River through our parks. In this regard, Cornerstone's production of *Touch The Water* was a huge complement to our efforts. The production actively engaged many local community members and creatively explored the multi-faceted perspectives of stakeholders involved with the Los Angeles River by proximity, necessity, or choice" (qtd. in Miranda).



2009 performance of Cornerstone Theater's *Touch the Water*.
© John Luker

Walking south on the western bank you pass a series of mini-parks including Steelhead Mini-Park (featuring Brett Goldstone artwork of steelhead trout iron silhouettes and an outdoor classroom made of River materials), Riverdale Mini-Park, Duck (Meadowvale) Mini-Park, Osos Mini-Park, and Egret Mini-Park. Many of these parks have small or functional public artwork made of River-rock or steel. An example of this is Michael Amescua's steel gates, including a deer, bear, and flora and fauna, in Osos Mini-Park. Beyond Osos Park and Egret Park, Riverside Drive curves and turns into North Figueroa. In this stretch the Arroyo Arts Collective staged two site specific and multidisciplinary exhibitions, including River Visions and River Alchemy.

River Visions (2000) / River Alchemy (2002)
Arroyo Arts Collective
Visual Arts/Performing Arts Exhibition

River Visions was a site-specific exhibition featuring over 50 diverse artists working along a two and one-half mile stretch between Riverside Drive (near Figueroa Street and Zanja Madre Park) and Fletcher Drive (near Rattlesnake Park). Taking place over the weekend of April 29-30, 2000, local River-adjacent artists used the River bank, the River bed, and the River itself to address a range of concerns through a variety of multidisciplinary media, modes of art, and environmental, historical, social, political, and spiritual issues. Artists selected by a juried submission pool made visual representations of the River through sculpture, photography, posters and panels, found objects, video art, folk art and storytelling, and artistic re-interpretations of early River plans. Several of these artworks were later displayed in an exhibition at the California Building of the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens as a part of the ongoing Re-envisioning the L.A. River series, a program of Occidental College and FoLAR. Patrons of the event included people from the adjacent River communities, bicyclists, dog walkers, and art enthusiasts from across Los Angeles.

Intended to be a catalyst for future River-related artwork and community engagement, the project brought a new audience of people interested in seeing the River, many who were unaware it was possible to walk along the River's banks or partake in the River's natural beauty through a growing network of pocket parks. "As artists, we can only hope that our art, though it will not physically change the depleted landscape, may affect possibilities for a renewed river," said participating artist Chusien Chang (Siegel 2). The project was sponsored by Dyanmic Builders as a percent for art requirement provided by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and funded in part by the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, Supervisor Gloria Molina, and former Los Angeles City Councilmember Jackie Goldberg.

River Alchemy marked the second time in the River's history where local artists transformed the River-space into a temporary exhibition space for site-specific art installations. In 2002, 24 artists were selected to create art along a mile and a half stretch from Gateway Park (at Knox Avenue) to Steelhead Park at Oros Street (in Frogtown). The event culminated with a screening of Daniel Marlos' film, *Los Angeles River*, at a reception at Frank Romero's Lil' Frogtown Gallery. Having lived in Los Angeles' Glassell Park community since 1980, a constant view of the River inspired Marlos. A soundless film, Marlos used a hand-cranked Bolex movie camera to shoot the River every third Sunday of the month for an entire year. According to Marlos, the result was "visual music" – variations on themes of breeze and current, structured by changes in the weather, the limits of the hand-cranked process, and the

positioning of the camera for each 25-second shot" (Thomas 4).

Apart from several returning artists that participated in the 2000 River Visions exhibition, many new River-inspired artists emerged with poetry, photography, ecological art, cartography, ambient music and soundscapes⁵⁰, many of which focused on the issue of environmental stewardship and habitat restoration. Leo Limón was on hand to paint two River CATz, as well as representatives from the FoLAR, NET, and the Audubon Center.

Although not visible from the River space, another important site near the transition from Riverside Drive to North Figueroa Street is the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens. The Center is a beautiful Spanish-style facility that serves as the headquarters of FoLAR, NET, the Arroyo Seco Foundation, and several other environmentally-based public and non-profit organizations. Once home to Lawry's California Center⁵¹, the site is now comprised of a series of buildings named after historical places in California. It includes interpretive native plant gardens, fountains, and an interpretive center. The adjacent River Garden Park (across the parking lot) features native plants and mosaics. To commemorate the founding of the FoLAR, Lewis MacAdams wrote the following poem:

The Founding of the Friends of the Los Angeles River

Lewis MacAdams

Poetry

We are on our way
down the river
for the first time.

We carry heavy duty wire clippers
to cut through the fence beside the
1st Street Bridge courtesy of Gregg Gannon,
then we
Climb down the step,
cement-covered bank
to the river.

We don't know where we're going exactly.
We walk upstream
to where the Arroyo Seco

⁵⁰ An audio recording or performance of sounds that create the sensation of experiencing a particular acoustic environment or space.

⁵¹ Lawry's was once a popular restaurant with 600,000 annual visitors. Built during the 1950s and 1970s, it was almost demolished for the site of the adjacent Home Depot. It was purchased and preserved by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority.

flows into the Los Angeles.

This must have been
One of the most beautiful places

Around here, once—
A thicket, a confluence,
An Avalon at the meeting
Of year-round streams.

Deer quiver at the edge of memory.
Night herons splash.
There are steelhead. We don't like

to look back.
Now there are railroad tracks
on both banks of the river, three freeway
bridges—the 10, the 101, and the 5—cross it.

Through a tunnel grey with couches
and people sleeping in abandoned automobiles,
the Arroyo meekly flows [...]

ARROYO SECO

(Lower Arroyo Seco & Confluence)

The Arroyo Seco is one of Los Angeles' most historic cultural communities. In the early 1900s, as the center of California's Arts and Crafts Movement, it was celebrated both for its natural beauty, cultural amenities, architectural heritage, and diverse neighborhoods. Improvements in transportation, industry, and a general interest in the outdoors and healthier living served to connect residents of the area and create what became an Arroyo identity. Today the area is experiencing a new cultural energy and resurgence in large part due to the programming and advocacy of the Arroyo Arts Collective and the Highland Park Heritage Trust, specifically in the Lower Arroyo Seco.

Walking south, beyond the small cottonwood and willow tree islands and pocket parks that line the Glendale Narrows is a ribbon of concrete. At this point the Golden State (I-5) Freeway, Riverside Drive, Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway, and the Metrolink commuter train cross over the River. The heat and exhaust fumes from cars mute the hues of the charcoal asphalt and green algae in the River. If you look through the haze to the east, you can see Taylor Yards from a different vantage point. The rumble of an afternoon Metrolink train ensues. Thin and wide, the River's water crashes gently, but entitled, against their path.

Immediately after crossing under the overpass for the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway, you stand in the

shadow of the Art Deco-inspired Figueroa Street Viaduct and Parkway. You have reached the historic Arroyo Seco Confluence – where the Los Angeles River and the Arroyo Seco meet – the gateway to the Lower Arroyo Seco and the original founding of the City of Los Angeles.

This important area has gained significant historical and environmental prominence as an area imbued with many historical accounts. On August 2, 1769 the Spanish expedition of Gaspar de Portola “discovered” the River, and Father Crespi noted in his diary it was a “good-sized, full flowing River, about seven yards wide, with very good water, pure and fresh”...“a very lush and pleasing spot in every respect” (Gumprecht 37). As a result, the pueblo was established at nearby, present-day Los Angeles State Historic Park. Despite that today a complex infrastructure of railroads, freeways, and bridges, surrounding this area, it still serves as an inspirational creative site evident in Lewis MacAdams’ poem The Voice of the River.

The Voice of the River

Lewis MacAdams
Poetry

The Voice of the River
is a red wing blackbird
twittering in the trash bags
festooned across the branches across the
branches of a cottonwood
like prayer flags⁵²

The freeways are louder than the River.
The I-5, the 110, the L.B.⁵³
overwhelm the River and its tributaries
with their roar. But when the tributaries
bring their gifts of rain water to the main stem[..]

I hear the River singing through the passing railroad cars,
the screeching metal as a Metrolink commuter train
tears apart. News choppers circle overhead, the howling
ambulance sirens
followed by the coyote pack’s howl[...]

At the center of itself
The River is silence,
and that’s where I come in:
with sounds in my head
and the words in my heart.

⁵² Also referred to as the Pasadena Freeway or 110 Freeway.

⁵³ Long Beach Freeway.

Apart from poetry, the Arroyo Seco Confluence has also inspired visual, multimedia, and performance, ranging from graffiti art to film. Notable projects included 2007's Meeting of Styles-Los Angeles international graffiti conference, the Echo Park Film Center's production of *This is the LA River*, and Stephan Koplowitz: Task Force's performance of Liquid Landscapes.

Meeting of Styles: Los Angeles (2007)

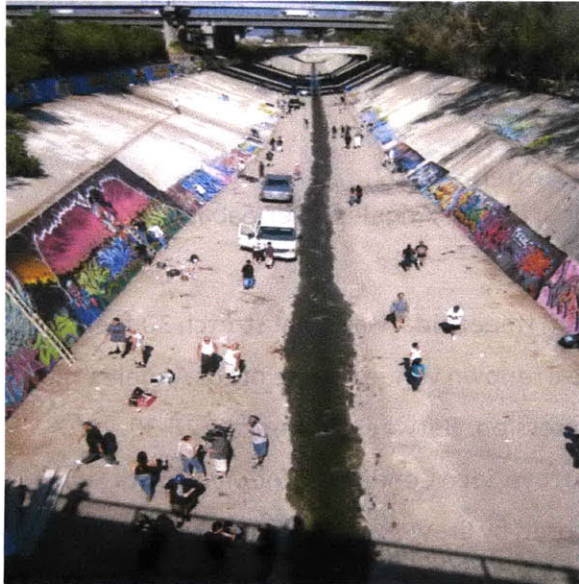
Crewest Gallery, Man One Designs, Friends of the Los Angeles River, Sabataz
Graffiti Art Exhibition

The River is an incessant magnet for graffiti art. With trapezoidal walls that stretch 30-feet high and over 50 miles, it is no surprise the River has become a renowned venue for one of Los Angeles' most formidable artistic exports and forms of sub-cultural expression. Between September 28-30, 2007, graffiti artists from around the world convened at the Arroyo Seco Confluence for Meeting of Styles: Los Angeles, an international graffiti conference. Sponsored by Crewest Gallery, FoLAR, ManOne Design, and Sabataz, they provided over 10,000-square-feet to more than 200 graffiti artists and crews for collaborative art making. The event was originally scheduled for the previous week, but due to rain and the constant threat of flooding, it was rescheduled.

Since the 1990s, Meeting Of Styles has launched over 60 events in over 20 countries across Europe and North America and attracted over 60,000 people. Marketed as both a hip-hop and street art festival, over 2,000 people attended Meeting of Styles at the Arroyo Seco Confluence, some from as far as Germany and Sweden. Crewest Gallery and Man One Design estimated the final work to be worth in excess of \$250,000. "This event is historic, just in the sense that we're actually painting legally in the River which is a landmark for anyone that lives in L.A.," said Man One (qtd. in Label Networks). "I've never been to something with this many artists painting at once... If it's not a world record, at least it's a historic L.A. event." A month long exhibition, River City Visions, at Crewest Gallery in downtown Los Angeles, was coordinated in conjunction with the event to showcase oil painting and aerosol work from the River artists.

Although graffiti is regarded as an informal practice, both Crewest Gallery and Man One Design secured a permit from the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works. Soon after its completion, the mural became a source of controversy. Despite an open letter from Crewest Gallery and Man One Design to the County of Los Angeles identifying the value and role of public art in Los Angeles, the County ordered the full whitewashing of the mural soon thereafter. This action would not only prevent future aspirations for a larger festival-like event in future years, but it also raised

critical questions as to the lack of public policy supporting creative expression along the River. Some of these perspectives were documented in the Echo Park Film Center's *This is the LA River* mini-documentary film.



Graffiti art produced during two-day 2007 Meeting of Styles: Los Angeles.
© LA Weekly/Lurker

This is the LA River (2007)
Echo Park Film Center
Documentary Film

The River is a place that is open to many interpretations. Depending on whom you ask, it is either a symbol of hope or an urban wasteland. Perhaps its most unique range of definitions lies in the perspectives of 21 neighborhood youth, between the ages of 14 and 19, who used 16mm film to capture the meaning of the River. Working with the Echo Park Film Center, the youth produced *This is the LA River* mini-documentary as part of a 12-week after school program.

Through basic training on documentary filmmaking technique and equipment and guest lectures from River advocates, historians, and users, students documented these important stories. The result was a 30-minute collaborative film examining many of the River's critical past, present, and future issues. The Echo Park Film Center screened the mini-documentary at the Film Center's microcinema, University of Southern California's the School of Social Work Theater, and at Farmlab, under the River-adjacent Spring Street Bridge.

Inspired by the power of film, these 21 youth explored the entire span of the River, from its upstream origins in the San Fernando Valley to its terminus at the Port of Long Beach. Below are some

of the perspectives from artists and patrons at Meeting of Styles 2007 captured on film as a part of *This is the LA River*:

One community member remarked:

"History is what's going on in the city of Northeast L.A., which is known as the L.A. River, which is known to the native people, the Gabrielinos, the Chumash people, the indigenous people. This is where they used to live, wash their clothes, and bathe themselves. This was their source of water. So you have all these graffiti artists, writers, and muralists come and do all these beautiful messages, and the city letting them do it is a beautiful thing."

A native of the area said:

"I used to come here as a kid, come to the River, play around, you know, try to find guppies, little frogs. There are a lot of frogs around here, Frogtown, it's cool, a beautiful thing. Now I'm for sure going to come to the River, bring my little girl, my little ones to see the beautiful murals that have happened, for sure, peace."

A graffiti artist participating in the event stated:

"I think it's fabulous. It's probably the chilliest day you'll ever see that has graffiti incorporated with it. Usually graffiti has bad baggage, but today everyone comes from different parts of the world to just do art. That's the great part about it. Well this is beautiful art. I know the L.A. River is for dumping bodies and syringes. Whatever you think about L.A., because L.A. is so eclectic, it's so diverse. Expected the unexpected in the L.A. River."

A new visitor to the River claimed:

"I've driven past it, but I've never spent this amount of time. My impressions of it? I love it. I love it and I hope they are not going to get rid of it anytime soon. It's like every time I'm in L.A. it should be like 'Let's go see the riverbed because there's so much cool stuff.' I mean I love this right here, this water going by."

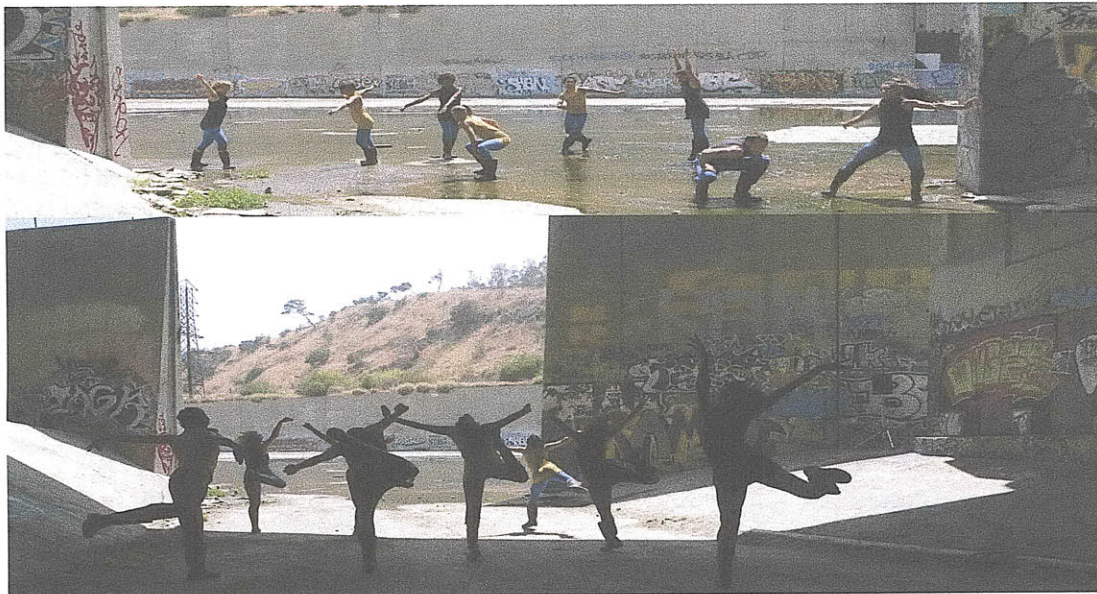


Youth recording for *This is the LA River* mini-documentary.
© Echo Park Film Center

Liquid Landscapes (2009)
(Arroyo Seco Confluence)
Stephan Koplowitz: TaskForce
Dance and Poetry

Visual and literary art are not the only creative mediums inspired by the Arroyo Seco Confluence. In 2008, Stephan Koplowitz: TaskForce choreographed and produced *Liquid Landscapes*, a site-specific performance tour of water related sites in the Los Angeles basin. FoLAR, in association with the Roy and Edna Disney California Arts Theater (REDCAT) and the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts), produced six dance events from June 29 to July 6, 2009. Sites includes Malibu Beach, the historic Farmer's Market, The Watercourt at California Plaza, the Port of Los Angeles, "Under the Spring Street Bridge"⁵⁴, and the Arroyo Seco Confluence of the Los Angeles River. According to the TaskForce Artist Statement:

"The inspiration for creating TaskForce was to have the means to enter into a creative dialogue with a chosen community. This would be accomplished by TaskForce creating site-specific performances seen in several sites within a short period of time and actively engaging with different artists and organizations from the community. The idea was that a small ensemble of artists would "blanket" a city, town, a region and give that public a chance to re-new their perspective on their environment and start a conversation about art and public life."



TaskForce's *Liquid Landscapes* performance at the Arroyo Seco Confluence.
© Scott Groller

⁵⁴ A site programmed by Farmlab/Not A Cornfield/Metabolic Studio.

On Saturday, July 6, 2008, a group of over 70 patrons gathered at the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens to begin a daylong tour and dance performance along the Los Angeles River. Beginning at the Sepulveda Basin, patrons walked, drove, or rode bikes to three other sites (Yoga Park in the Glendale Narrows, The Great Heron Gates along Riverside Drive, and the Arroyo Seco Confluence). Acclaimed local poet, Suzanne Lummis, and writer and River tour guide, Jennifer Price, led the tour. Covered in knee high rubber boots, eight dancers, as well as local artists, culminated three weeks of intensive research, rehearsal, and exploration into a responsive piece about water – one of Southern California's most critical agendas. Between 2008 and 2009 the project continued in the United Kingdom in the Plymouth area, Buckland Abbey, Dartington, and ended in Germany in 2010.

Cross under the Avenue 19 Bridge and Amtrak bridge and look up as you pass the San Fernando Road overpass. High above the ground are hundred-year-old etchings and writings – historical graffiti – written by hobos, wanderers, and other train nomads. Written with chalk and charcoal, this is not your typical aerosol-based graffiti art. According to an early Los Angeles Times account:

"River Bottom is Queerest Spot in Los Angeles / Hobos Washing; Junk Men Searching / Boy Fins Fish Ponds in the Puddles... Trudging over the sands of the Los Angeles River bed, a few days ago, I came upon another world. A world, whose inhabitants are mostly tramps and playing children... The inherent desire of the roaming tramp seems to be to leave at the places where he has tarried some mark or inscription as evidence of his visit. Scrawled in oil and tar on the concrete bases of the sewer trestle, below Fourth street, are a great number of these marks. They bear mute testimony to the visits to the river bottom of numerous notables of hobo-land. If they are to be accepted as authentic." (qtd. in Linton "100 Year Hobo Graffiti").

Patt Morrison made a similar observation about the dwellers and activities of the River's former and current users in *Rio L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River*. "As it begins with nomads, it ends with nomads. Tribal people lived for thirty centuries in a peripatetic minuet with the river and the water. In the twentieth century, other tribes took up residence along the angled concrete verges" (44).

Internationally renown and local graffiti artist, Chaz Bajorquez, also accounted for transient populations in the River.

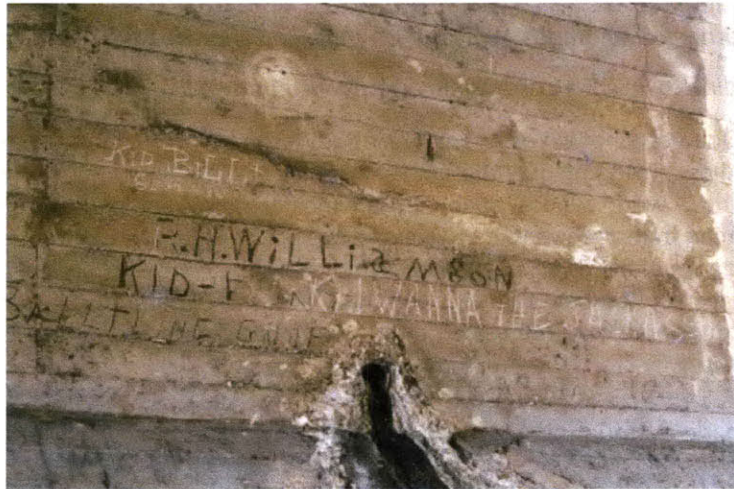
"What you would see were 'hobos.' You know, train transients and all that stuff. That was big. And they have their own style of chalk marks, and stuff like that. So we would see hobo villages right along the train tracks and we would see men go down there washing their clothes in the riverbeds and all that... The river was a lot more, um more about nature. But it was full of graffiti. It was always kind of hidden in little spaces. So I was the first guy, not only to start a tag image, but actually started to tag up the river – out in the open, where everyone could see. I hit up the spiral staircase up at the 5 – the 5 and the 10 Freeway. It lasted there from '69 to '83/'84. Nobody messed with it... So in the river you used to see graffiti that would be there for over ten years and slowly weather away" (UGLAR 120).

Historic Hobo Graffiti

Kid Bill, Oakland Red, others

According to Joe Linton, most of the hobo graffiti has remained undisturbed due to the Army Corps deepening of the channel in the 1930s and 1940s. Some of the most extensive work came from Kid Bill and Oakland Red. Below is Linton's transcription, as referenced in his October 3, 2008 entry, "Hundred Year Old Hobo Graffiti," on the popular *L.A. Creek Freak* blog:

"HB," "RHW," "VA ?INFEN?," "Kid StAM?N?," "ANO 1 CAMPO?ON K," "FS," drawing of a horse, "?ARDE?," "HNO? OLE F? +8-13-14," in drawing of scroll: "J.W.J. CHITO TUCSON ?i? 9?/1/21," "Kid SMITH," "Ki? EE? KID," "Adentro? Culos de Sangre," "8-12-14 +HARDEN+," "Kid. ART THE BALLTLING? GiLdf?," "MIKE TH???", "KID BILL+ 8-13-14," "R. H. WILLiaMSon," "KID-FLINT," "Kid WANNA tHE JACKASS," "TOM D," "?ANG??," "OAKLANDRED," and "Ki."



100-year old hobo graffiti under the Avenue 19 bridge.
© Maria Margarita Lopez

As you walk you notice a considerable difference in the width of the River as well as in the amount of water. You also see an abundance of river stones that line up the pedestrian walkway, near the bike path. Walking you see uneven rectangular patches of dark and light gray, marks left from the whitewashing of the Meeting of Styles graffiti art in 2007. Continue walking north past the sparse rows of sycamore trees that line the banks. Proceed under the concrete deck of ramps that lead to the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway and the Golden State Freeway. Occasionally passing a cyclist, jogger, or person walking their dog, this area is a peaceful reprieve. The next major landmark you will reach is the West Avenue 26 Bridge, which was also a focal point of Arroyo Fest and various other River re-visioning projects.

ArroyoFest / Re-envisioning the Los Angeles River:
A Program of Community and Ecological Revitalization (2003 / 2000)
Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI), Occidental College and
Friends of the Los Angeles River
Multidisciplinary

Re-envisioning the Los Angeles River: A Program of Community and Ecological Revitalization included more than 56 organizational co-sponsors. Working collaboratively, these organizations produced a yearlong series of 40 forums, events, activities, and projects focused on the River between August 1999 and September 2000. While many programs focused on education, policy, environment, engineering, and community building, others focused on arts, cultural, and historic events, including poetry readings and visual art exhibitions. The goals of the program included reframing policy for the River to include both community and ecological restoration, creating new constituencies for this agenda, and informing and influencing Angelenos to discover and get involved with the River's future. Overall, these events explored how the River could serve multiple roles through culture and ecology. Many also led to the development of new programs and the publishing of UEIP director Robert Gottlieb's *Reinventing Los Angeles: Nature and Community in the Global City*, in 2002.

The project was supported by a Community Heritage grant from the California Council for the Humanities and was developed at a time when a renewed interest in urban river revitalization was a popular nationwide topic. This was also the case for the Los Angeles River, where a new synergy of community and environmental activism began to grow. Seeking to develop a broader and more inclusive view of the River, as well as a way to honor the outgrowth of River-related policy and arts and cultural activities, the program provided new ways to tell stories and shape the dynamics surrounding the River into a valuable and positive impact for policy and activism – ecologically and culturally.

In describing one of the programs, Lewis MacAdams said "We wanted to do a poetry reading about the Los Angeles River, but quickly realized how few poems about the river had actually been written; so we decided to commission our own" (qtd. in Gottlieb 12). The poets were instructed that the poems could be of any length and deal with the river or any of its tributaries. The only requirement, according to MacAdams was to "get their feet wet." In an interview, Gottlieb stated:

"Los Angeles doesn't have historical memory - it doesn't see its complexity. This creates a large challenge regarding contemporary discourse along the River - as you change the way you talk about it, it makes it more real. For artists, their challenge is to help the City and County [of Los Angeles] to look at the landscape of the River and help re-imagine it beyond traditional ways. The River should be a space where people feel encouraged to express themselves, have flexible spaces, and should facilitate more community-based and temporary art projects, from traditional arts to agriculture."

Evidently, the program illustrated how the planning issues surrounding the River represent a microcosm of the issues facing Los Angeles. It also led to ArroyoFest, a major event attended by 3,000 people that allowed for the closure of the Arroyo Seco Parkway from Glenarm Avenue in Pasadena (at the terminus of the Parkway) to Avenue 26, and allowed people to walk, ride, and experience the Parkway and the Arroyo Seco on June 15, 2003. Along with Re-envisioning the L.A. River, ArroyoFest proved the power of incorporating multiple uses in a flexible space for planning efforts along the River. Appendice 4.3 includes a sample of arts related projects from the Re-envisioning the L.A. River Series.

Continue walking along the Arroyo Seco and you find many more instances of graffiti, as well as many more bridges, some historic and some contemporary. Cross under another portion of the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway and find a pedestrian footbridge. Most of the eastern portion of the Arroyo in this stretch is light industrial or automobile-oriented. Cross a railroad bridge as well as the overpass for Pasadena Avenue. To your right is Heritage Square, a collection of late 19th and early 20th century homes rescued from other districts of Los Angeles during 1960s urban renewal. The most visible properties here include the Octagon House and the Palms Depot. The eastern edge now becomes residential while the western banks continue to support the rush of cars. The tagging and graffiti art also get more vivid. It was also the site of some of Chaz Bojorquez's early work, as documented in the Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River, Volume 1.

Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River, Volume 1 (2002)

Various Artists

Visual Art (graffiti, oil, painting)

Featuring artwork from Los Angeles-based artists including Chaz Bojorquez, ZES, Jack Rudy, Chuey Quintanar, Steve Martinez, Gregg Stone, Robert Meinhardt, Chris Brand, SinerLTS, Evan Skrederstu, Rob Sato, and more, the *Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River, Volume 1* focuses on the art and biology of the River, from graffiti culture and tattooing to native flora and fauna. Like me, the father of the project, the late Ulysses Zemanova, had a special childhood connection to the River. In his introduction to the text, Zemanova stated:

"I remember the days of childhood, those that marks us all the most. Had I had the rationale of an adult, I would never have allowed myself the job of shit and waste, of the intestines that make up the heart of a city. With the aide of candles and courage, my comrades and entered into the bowels of certain tunnels near our houses. Certainly I was filled with fear, but the desire to answer the question 'What is down here?' was stronger. We went in to these places, within which we found insects both repugnant and horrifying, decaying materials of various sorts, and finally writing on the walls (which evoked some sense of security, as there was some evidence of other adventurers having gone through a similar journey)."

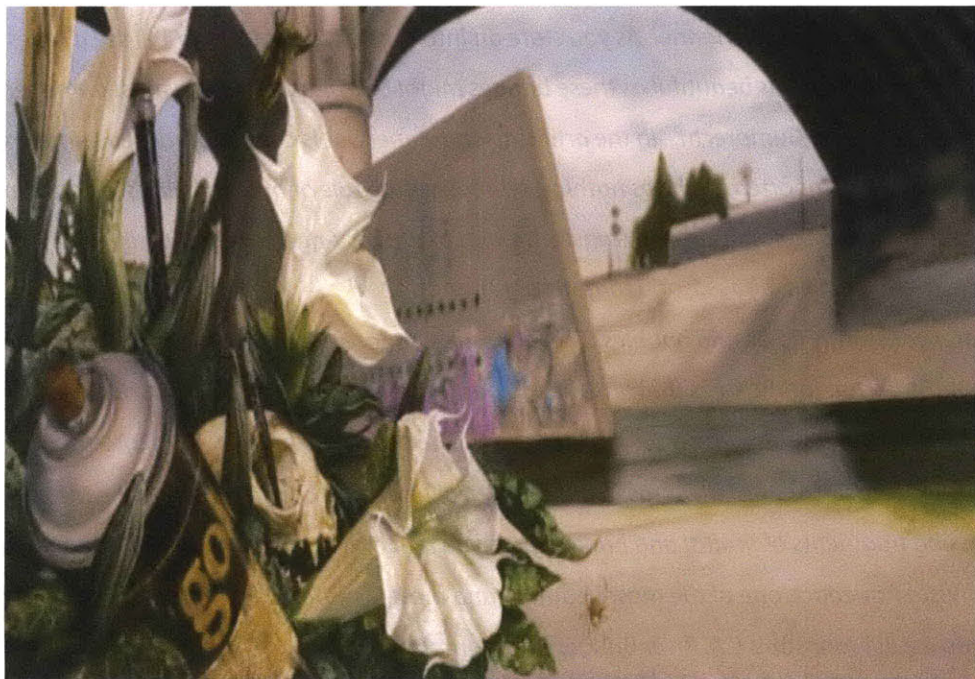
A unique take on the River, the book shows an evolving and magical canvas and cultural landscape through the eyes of visual artists. One of these is Chaz Bajorquez.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Bajorquez (A.,K.A. "Charlie Chingaso") spent most of his life in the Highland Park section of the Arroyo Seco. Surrounded by neighbors including hippies to gang members, Bajorquez was influenced by a mix of traditions and visual styles.

"So all my life I was raised with graffiti in my neighborhood, but it was the pride of the community, because they used to do the role call," said Bajorquez. "It wasn't about the, uh, 'one tag,' you know? – about going all city or all state or anything. It was about being in your group and only writing in your neighborhood. I lived on Avenue 43. I lived and went to little league on 43 – the home of the 'Avenues' – for quite a few generations. That was my riverbed, so I used to write down there all the time...I got to know all the bridges. I've walked on top of all of them. So, the river was always a place to go down to meet all your friends" (UGLAR 119).

For several other accounts of his time near the River, Bajorquez stated:

"When we were little kids, probably about twelve, we lived up around Avenue 66, the northern part of the Arroyo Seco and we would hike all the way down to the riverbed. There used to be a lot of frogs in there. Some of the guys would be real mean...So we would go down to the sewer lines from the street runoffs, into the riverbed and there would be a little-ass stream – maybe eight inches wide and an inch deep of green moss. We'd hike it one or two more miles at an upgrade and stick candles to the walls, light 'em along the way, [and] then go 'sewer sliding'!...But I always noticed graffiti in there. Way, way back in there. They used to write it with pencil or with tar or with their candles with the smoke. There was smoke writing all across the top. That was the majority of them. So when I started tagging, at around nineteen down there in the Arroyo, I already had affiliation with the river. It was very romantic. It was very beautiful. I mean, at nighttime the river is gorgeous" (118).



Oil paintings from the Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River, Volume 1.
©UGLAR

Walk past the Montecito Heights Recreation Area and the Sycamore Grove Park Pedestrian Footbridge that leads to Ernest E. Debs Regional County Park, home of the Audubon Center. I used to live near the next bridge, on Avenue 52, where it was possible to access the Arroyo Seco through a gap near the on-ramp to the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway. Beyond Avenue 52, the landscape gets lush and greener. Along with the Via Marisol Bridge, both have historic lighting standards. After you pass under the arch of the Via Marisol Bridge and the following pedestrian bridge, you see Arroyo Seco Regional Park.

Providing a connection to the western section of Highland Park is the first of three beautiful historic bridges: the classical Avenue 60 Bridge with its symmetric arch framing the Arroyo; the Santa Fe Arroyo Seco Railroad Bridge, the oldest and highest railroad bridge in Los Angeles County now used for the Metro Gold Line; and the York Boulevard Bridge, one that also boasts large arches and serves as an important connection to South Pasadena and Pasadena. This part of the Lower Arroyo Seco also includes the three-acre Arroyo Seco Woodland and Wildlife Park.

DOWNTOWN

The downtown Los Angeles segment of the River is the most iconic of the entire River. A popular location for film shoots and graffiti art, it also includes a series of historic bridges dating back to the City Beautiful Movement of the 1930s.

If you are not taking a detour along the Arroyo Seco at the Arroyo Seco Confluence, continue walking along the River through the main channel. As you stare off into the hazy horizon, you will see a series of bridges built between 1910 and 1932. As beautiful as these bridges might be, this is one of the most damaged parts of the River. As stated by Blake Gumprecht, "In the artificial landscape that is contemporary Los Angeles, where even the palm trees were imported, perhaps nothing symbolizes the role of human beings in changing the face of the earth more than the exploitation and transformation of the Los Angeles River. Modified beyond recognition the river was used, abused, and forgotten" (3).

The water constantly flows and bubbles. The landscape is more urban than natural. There is no vegetation in sight, except for the trees that line the top portions of the levy. Plastic trash bags and an abandoned shopping cart are strewn on the concrete floor. The smell of exhaust in 75-degree heat.

Pass the Old City Jail on the left, across from the Metrolink maintenance yard, and the Metro Gold Line overpass. Crossing fragments of graffiti and broken glass you reach the base of the North Broadway Bridge/Buena Vista Aqueduct, one of the most beautiful and most historic bridges along the River. It also served as the backdrop for Bill Johnson's L.A. River Bridges photography series.

L.A. River Bridges Series (2005)

Bill Johnson
Photography

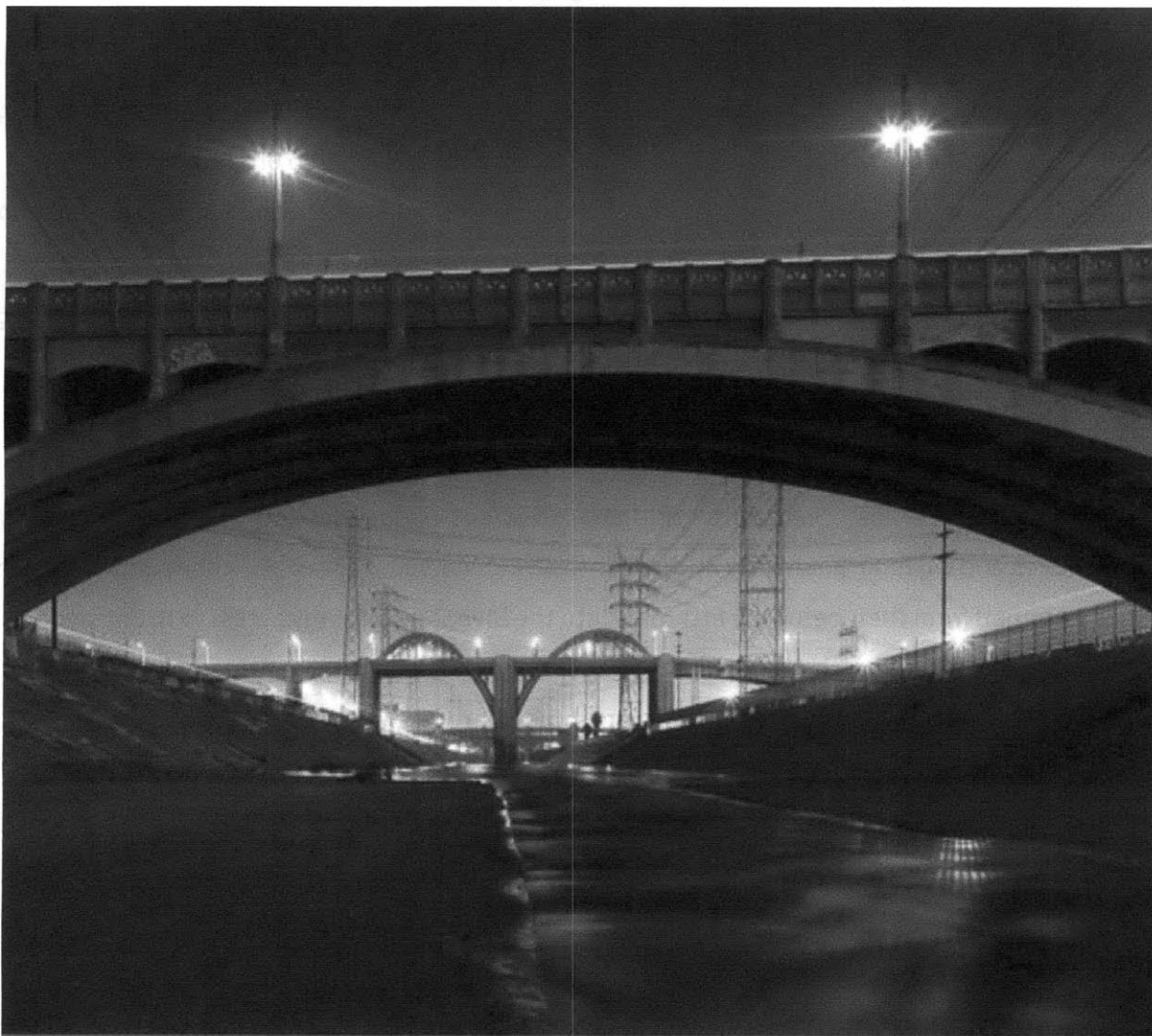
I first met Bill Johnson during the Arroyo Art Collective's Annual Discovery Tour in 2006. As one of Los Angeles longest running community driven open studio and home tours, I had been attending the Discovery Tour since 2001. Considering the tour geographically focused on the culturally-rich River-adjacent communities of Highland Park, Mt. Washington, Cypress Park, and Eagle Rock, it was no surprise that the region's artistic legacy was so strong.

Upon arriving at a large house on a precipice, friends and neighbors greeted me. "You're going to like the photographs the best," one said. I stepped into the large living room, where there were stacks of black and white photos, most of which depicted one of my favorite features of Los Angeles – the historic L.A. River Bridges: The North Broadway Bridge/Buena Vista Viaduct, Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct, Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct, Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct, and Olympic Boulevard Bridge/Ninth Street Viaduct. Perhaps my connection to these bridges stemmed from their being my first foray into the River as well as my access to it, or maybe it was that I used them to cross the River when riding from my home in East Los Angeles to my grandmother's job in a nondescript textile factory somewhere between the River and Santa Fe Avenue. As an adult, my favorite way to reconnect with Los Angeles after a long trip was to zig-zag across the River on its historic bridges in my car.

Standing inside a stranger's living room, I took some time to consider my favorite River Bridge. These bridges have spanning arches, spandrels Works Progress Administration (WPA) bas-relief details, and history. What made these bridges special went far beyond their physical beauty. Designed by Merrill Butler, the City of Los Angeles built these bridges during the City Beautiful Movement. Like our resurgent attitudes of the River today, the design of these bridges was a comment on the public values of the time. But of all the River bridges, I knew the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct the best. Unlike some of the grander bridges, it was modest in ornamentation. It reminded me of people's overall view of the Los Angeles River, when compared to others. "I'll take this one, the photograph of the Fourth Street Bridge," I said.

Bill Johnson specialized in photographing landscapes across the American West, including coastal vistas, rivers, forests, cities, mountains, and deserts. The work of early land surveyors like William H. Jackson, Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, and David Muench inspired him. Given that landscape photography had evolved to win the same appreciation as traditional forms of visual art, Johnson used large format transparencies and digital outputs for his archival prints. Primarily employing a 4x5

Linhoff Technika V, transparency film, and contrast adjustments in Adobe Photoshop.



Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct (foreground); First Street Bridge/Viaduct (background).

© Bill Johnson

Walk under the double arches of the North Spring Street Bridge where more historic hobo graffiti is visible. The trains blur. In this area you feel the solitude of the concrete canyon. The banks rise 30-feet tall. The channel flows along, four-feet wide, barely two-feet deep. Fronting the River is headquarters of the Not a Cornfield Project/Farmlab/Metabolic Studio, all cultural and ecological projects which stemmed from a 2006 public art project on present day Los Angeles State Historic Park. Water from this part of the River was also a key component to UCLA REMAP's 2007 installation of Junction.

Junction (2007)
UCLA REMAP/Re-mapping L.A.
New Media/Interactive Public Art

An interesting and participatory new media project engaged with the River was Junction, a module from Remapping-LA, a core project of UCLA's Center for Research in Engineering, Media and Performance (REMAP), the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, and the UCLA Henry Samueli School of Engineering and Applied Science in collaboration with California State Parks, Walt Disney Imagineering, and CENS/UCLA. Staged between November 1-4 2007, from dusk to midnight, Junction was visual and text-based public art media project that employed cell phone text messaging and sensing technology. Created and produced as a site-specific piece for Los Angeles State Historic Park, Junction was projected on the ruins of the *Zanja Madre*, along the western perimeter of the park. As users typed different text commands, an interpretative database containing thousands of historical images, videos, and sounds categorized by metadata would be projected on to the screen. These images changed and transformed according to the commands of other users and real time activity in the Los Angeles River, local traffic, and public transportation activity on passing Metro Gold Line trains.

Cross under the Main Street Bridge with the Brewery Arts Colony on your right. At the curve you notice two concrete pylons similar to the ones at the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge and the Glendale Boulevard/Hyperion Bridge. They exist to support rail infrastructure over the River. Above the River is the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's maintenance yard. At this point you see more graffiti art and tagging until you get to the Cesar Chavez Avenue Bridge/Macy Street Viaduct.

Here, in downtown Los Angeles' industrial corridor, is the overpass to the Hollywood (101) Freeway as well as the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct, which connected downtown Los Angeles to Boyle Heights. It was also the neighborhood of the former Deep River Gallery.

The western bank immediately following the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct was once home to the letters "MTA," a tag from the Metro Transit Assassins (also known as "Melting Toys Away" or "Must Take All"). They painted it with 300 gallons of white and 100 gallons of black paint over a period of four nights. At three stories tall, these three block letters spanned several city blocks, from the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct to the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct. However, in late 2009, public officials spent \$3.7 million dollars to whitewash the MTA letters and used it as an example to announce additional graffiti abatement funds to combat incidents.

The next bridge you pass under is the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct, another Merrill Butler classic and one that replaced downtown's last wooden bridge. From the arches below or from the vantage point of the Gothic iron railing and porticos above, its vistas are remarkable. The

Bridge also served as an important access point for Luis Rodriguez's poem, *The Concrete River*.

This Concrete River [excerpt] (1995)

Luis Rodriguez

Poetry

We sink into the dust,
Baba and me,
Beneath brush of prickly leaves;
Ivy strangling trees—singing
Our last rights of *locura*.
Homeboys. Worshipping God-fumes
Out of spray cans.

Our backs press up against
A corrugated steel fence
Along the dried banks
Of a concrete river.
Spray-painted outpourings
On walls offer a chaos
Of color for the eyes.

Home for now. Hidden in weeds.
Furnished with stained mattresses
And plastic milk crates.
Wood planks thrust into
thick branches
serves as roof.

The door is a torn cloth curtain
(knock before entering).
Home for now, sandwiched
In between the maddening days.

A metaphor for life on the Eastside, Rodriguez follows in the vein of other poems from the 1960s and 1970s that describe Los Angeles as a concrete jungle. Beginning the poem by building the parameters of his life, death is a constant and vivid image. Environment in this urban habitat is dying, but the only hope he and his friends have, and their reasons worth living, is the spray cans that allow them to get lost in an altered reality.

The next stop is one of my favorites – the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct.⁵⁵ Of all of the River

⁵⁵ Commonly referred to as the Sixth Street Viaduct.

Bridges, this one was the most recognizable. Used in numerous commercials, it was iconic for its riveted steel arches. Representative of the steel river bridges found in American cities like Portland and Pittsburgh, the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct was the only River bridge in the entire series to boast these. It was an image many were familiar with. Although it frames iconic images of Los Angeles' Art Deco City Hall and the San Gabriel Mountains, its best view is from within the River space.

The best-kept secret once harbored by every intrepid youth in East Los Angeles was access to the "unofficially official" entrance to the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct. Here, "under the bridge," beyond the skyscrapers of downtown and across the railroad tracks and freeways, is a rectangular tunnel, a ramp into an underworld of adventure. Once an old storm drain, the hallow passage is reminiscent of a prison cell. The safest way to get there was by car.

My first visit to entrance of the Sixth Street Bridge came soon after I learned how to drive. As I descended below grade into the underworld of the River I passed used mattresses and other trash. The water was low (as it usually is). I parked my car. Upon parking my car, I saw homeless encampments in the shadow and roar of the Amtrak Surfliner trains.

I remember once reading an article about the opening of the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct. Built in 1932, the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct spanned two-thirds of a mile. At 3,600-feet long, it was once the longest concrete bridge in California as well as one of the largest concrete bridges in the world (Linton 120). The last of the River Bridges to be built, the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct was considered a civic masterpiece, the great dame of the River. It ascends at Mateo Street, four blocks west of the River, and comes down again at Boyle Avenue. In an April 2010 opinion article to the *Los Angeles Times* about design options for potentially replacing the ailing Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct, Lewis MacAdams and Alex Ward, both members of the FoLAR Board, stated:

"No bridge in the city carries more symbolic weight either. There is no more direct route between Boyle Heights and the financial district than 6th Street, no bridge that better illustrates the physical proximity and the psychic distance between the working-class Eastside and the towers of the Figueroa corridor than 6th Street. No bridge more accurately symbolizes the forces that bring us together and pull us apart" ("Replacing L.A.'s iconic 6th Street Bridge").

In 2004 I read a touching feature article about the denizens of the River, between the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct and Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct in *Los Angeles Magazine*. In "Under the Bridge," Jesse Katz recounted the brutally honest stories of several homeless people including Seven, Ronnie, Gutter – an entire community that lived in the River space.

"The language of the bridge often seems to be drawn from proverbs, the conversations improbable, or at least out of place. For a time, I begin to think I have stumbled onto the most literate and theatrical homeless encampment in all of downtown, but wherever I wander people speak in profane and

extravagant profundities. It is, I suspect, a natural by-product of life on the edge, of being devoured by one's own frailties. Most of us never have to ask ourselves what it is that makes us human. Down here, on the river, under the bridge, those questions never cease."

"Los Angeles possesses one dozen of the handsomest bridges in the nation, engineered rainbows of beauty and utility, all built between 1910 and the Great Depression, every one of them on the nation's official register of historic places," wrote Patt Morrison in *Río L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River* (83). For many, these bridges represent an unlikely stretch of the River not known for its ecological merits but rather its classical arches and graceful concrete details. "The river is nothing but the bridges are sensational," said noted Los Angeles architectural historian, Robert Winter (83).

Perhaps the most famous of these men was Merrill Butler, the city's engineer 'for bridges and structures' (1923-1961) who studied engineering by correspondence course (Linton 123). Not only was Butler known for his work on the River bridges, but he also designed the beautiful WPA-era tunnels along the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway. Like the River itself, these bridges were formed out of reinforced concrete. Beyond utility, Butler's agenda for the design of the River Bridges was to "excite comment from visitors who enter and leave the city by railways" and "raise the status of Los Angeles as an enterprising, properly developed city" (Morrison and Lamonica 86-7).

Funded by a \$2 million Viaduct Bond Act in 1924, Los Angeles voters allowed for the city to upgrade and modernize its bridges. The design of the River bridges reflected the popular architectural styles of the time, from classical Beaux Arts to Art Deco. The bridges included a series of unique lighting standards, seating areas, scenic overlook areas, and areas for overhead wires⁵⁶ (Linton 123). In time, an effort to maintain public infrastructure waned as the automobile would bring a new era of development for Los Angeles. "Although these bridges aren't natural features, they do serve many river-restoration purposes. They evoke the history of the city, create a sense of place, and represent important public investment," remarked Joe Linton (265).

In January 2008, the Los Angeles City Council declared 11 River bridges to be Historic-Cultural Monuments⁵⁷. City improvement plans intending to give the bridges greater safeguards energized the effort. In a February 2009 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Cara Mia DiMassa and Corina Knoll quoted Councilmen Ed Reyes, "We have very few iconic structures to begin with, but if you look at these bridges, they represent Los Angeles."

⁵⁶ These features are most evident on the Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct.

⁵⁷ Local historic landmark designation approved by the City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Commission.



Interior of the former Sixth Street Bridge/Viaduct flood control drain.
© Amber Fitzsimmons

Beyond its homeless encampments and decorative arches and spandrels, the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct was also an important site for Osseus Labyrinth's *THEM*, a performance which took its cue from a 1954 science-fiction horror film (by the same name) that depicted an alien invasion across the River.

THEM (1999)
Osseus Labyrinth
Performance Art/Performance Film

Since 1989, Osseus Labyrinth has been an experimental arts group comprised of Mark Steger and Hannah Simms. The group self-describes themselves as "a manifestation of accumulated data from billions of years of evolution and recombination of matter and energy." The Los Angeles-based group has presented and performed internationally and domestically at universities and art spaces.

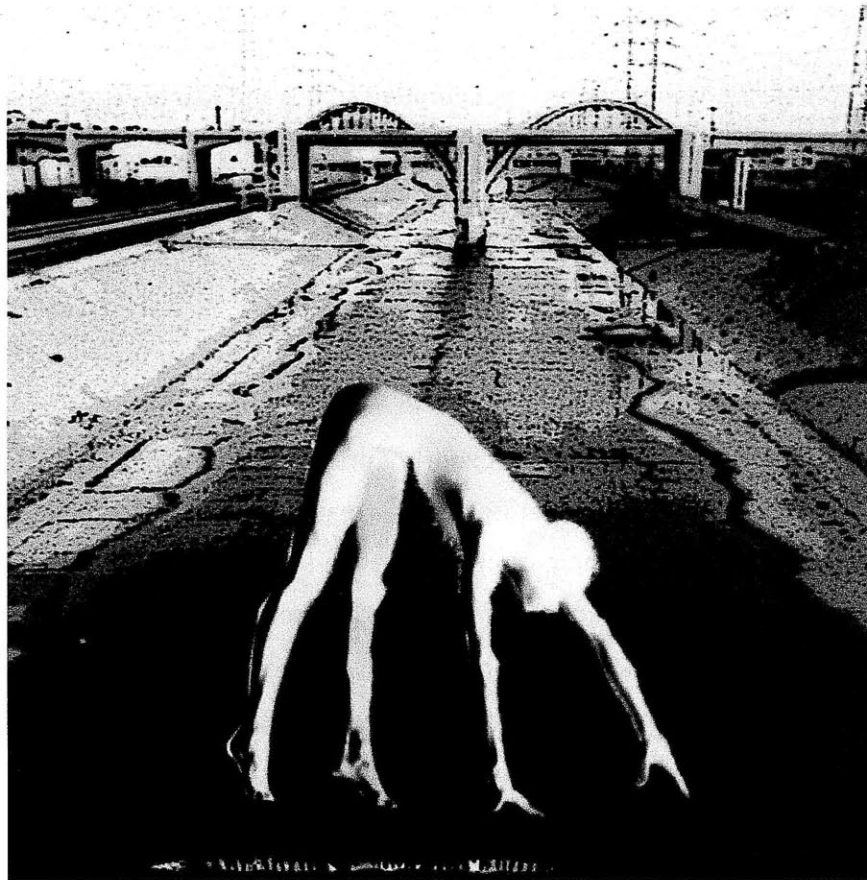
On October 4, 1999, Osseus Labyrinth coordinated an unforgettable production that was part performance art, part performance film. Amidst helicopters overhead and trains and cars along the banks, over 350 people drove through the entrance of the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct to watch Osseus Labyrinth hang from ropes off the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct, later to descend and be swept away by the River's current at the conclusion of the performance.

With the exception of a vague postcard mailing listing the group's name, the date, the time, and location, Osseus Labyrinth conducted no formal promotion for the event. The telephone line led to a three-minute voicemail message with important instructions on where to meet, what to wear, how to

access the River, and when to check for updates and a contingency plan.

A free event, it only cost the group \$500 for insurance and \$1,500 for equipment (harnesses and rope). While Steger and Sim were not successful in obtaining an on-site live performance permit, they did succeed in securing a film permit. In fact, under the guise of a "film shoot," the audience members were to serve as "extras" to the documentary Steger and Sim were producing. After-all, amidst the heavy-duty cables, lighting equipment, generator, and cameras, there was little separating Steger and Sim's performance from the special effects regularly displayed in the countless Hollywood film shoots that take place in the River space, most especially at this location. No major media outlets were on hand to cover the production. "It was all very guerilla," Steger said.

The River's concrete retaining walls in this area also served as a canvass for street art, most notably SaberOne's unofficial "longest graffiti mural in the country."



The intentionally vague invitation for Osseus Labyrinth's performance of THEM.
© Osseus Labyrinth

“The Longest Graffiti Mural in the Country?” (1997)

SaberONE
Graffiti Art

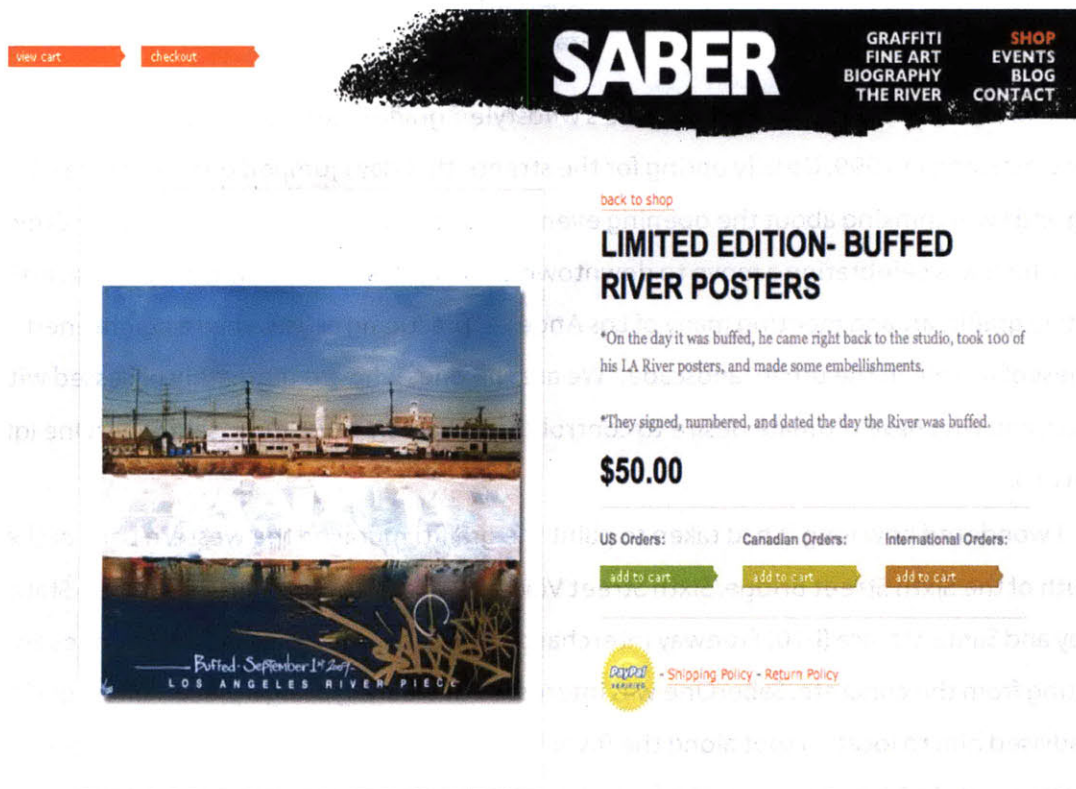
The first time I really noticed SaberOne’s wildstyle⁵⁸ graffiti mural on the River was on my way to work one morning in 1999. Usually opting for the streets, that day I jumped on the freeway. Traffic was moving and I was thinking about the opening event I had attended over the weekend for Crewest Gallery, which was celebrating a move to downtown Los Angeles. After seeing all the interesting and innovative graffiti art and meeting many of Los Angeles’ practicing artists, I had a heightened awareness of its role in the urban landscape. “We are the ones who are ultimately obsessed with cityscape, and who have ultimate desire to control the visuals on cityscapes,” said SaberOne (qtd. in “The River”).

I wondered how long it had taken to paint the graffiti mural on the western bank of the River, just south of the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct. When I approached the Golden State (I-5) Freeway and Santa Monica (I-10) Freeway interchange, it was hard to miss the vivid oranges and blues emanating from the concrete. SaberOne was interested in creating a large piece. Fellow graffiti artist, GKAE, advised him to locate a spot along the River visible from the freeways, but still hidden enough to practice paint. At 55-feet tall and 250-feet wide, it was informally heralded as the largest technicolor graffiti mural in Los Angeles, and possibly the world. In a period of close to 10 years, it took 126 gallons of Roller latex paint (97 original gallons and 29 additional gallons to touch-up the piece after New York-based graffiti artists defaced it, an action that would bring SaberOne international acclaim and attention). It took just over a month to paint. In his online account about his work on the River, SaberOne stated:

“We dragged the paint down to the River, which is covered by a slippery moss deposited on the concrete, and I started my letter ‘S.’ Soon, I realized that what I was doing was not even a quarter of the size that it needed to be—using perspective on the riverbed’s slant was impossible. And as I’m trying to figure this out—bleeding, pissed off and having a terrible time—there were workers in the train yard right above us. Soon after, they spotted us, and all of a sudden a helicopter appeared overhead and lit us up. ... Even though my pride was beaten, my piece was scaled wrong, and my cuts were throbbing, I knew I would have to face the River over and over again...” (qtd. in “The River”).

A recent outpour of support has resulted in viral online media as a venue to share feelings of loss and anger for the destruction of the piece. On his website, SaberOne sells posters of his piece – a 24x18 glossy poster of the original piece and a limited edition of the piece the day it was buffed.

⁵⁸ Wildstyle is an intricate form of graffiti done with aerosol spray paint. Due to its complexity, its interwoven and overlapping characters are often hard to read.



A section from SaberOne's website, where limited edition prints of the "Buffed River" are for sale.
© SaberOne.com

Walking along this stretch of land today, the only thing you notice are uneven, square patches of various shades of grey – a \$3.7 million dollar⁵⁹ effort to combat graffiti by City of Los Angeles, County of Los Angeles, and Army Corps of Engineers. Additionally, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority contracted the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to patrol the River area, given their ownership of the right-of-way alongside it. Although public officials recognize this is not a full proof method to prevent graffiti, they hope that recent imprisonments of graffiti artists along the River will prove a point.

The next landmark you reach is the Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct, one that is different than all the rest considering its construction atop an existing bridge. Then comes the Olympic Boulevard Bridge/Ninth Street Viaduct with its tremendous pylons and its restored railing motif. It is in this area where Bamboo Charlie collects materials for his found object shrines.

⁵⁹ This accounts for approximately one-fifth of what is spent on graffiti abatement in Los Angeles County alone.

The Found Object Shrines of Bamboo Charlie (1995)

Bamboo Charlie

Folk Art

Apart from knowing the access point into the River from below the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct, youth from East Los Angeles loved talking about Bamboo Charlie. Originally from Houston, Charlie came to Los Angeles with dreams to pursue acting. To seek inspiration, Charlie would walk along the River collecting interesting pieces of debris – broken games, lawn ornaments, and children's toys. "The best time to find good stuff in the River was right after a rainy day," said Charlie. Over the last 15 years, Charlie has amassed enough found objects and friendships with the communities along the River to create shrines for everyone from his friends at the Los Angeles Police Department's Hollenbeck Police Station to an amateur opera singer who would practice at the base of the Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct. "Some people call it art, but it's just my life," he said.

But before the whitewashing, these walls were altars to Los Angeles' legendary street art. In fact, the River has always been a locus for graffiti artists. Its trapezoidal concrete walls made it easy. According to Steve Grody, author of *Graffiti L.A.*, "Graffiti artists are constantly surveying the city for new places to 'hit.' Some spots are chosen for visibility, some for their obscurity in hopes that their piece will stay up longer, others because they're easily available, and some are location where only other writers pass through" (266).

Beyond the historic Sears Department Store where my family used to shop and the Olympic Boulevard Bridge/Ninth Street Viaduct is one more historic bridge, the Washington Boulevard Bridge, built in 1930. This bridge marks the end of the River's 32 formal miles within the City of Los Angeles, but leaves 20 more downstream miles of concrete, informal art, debris, and infrastructure to traverse.

"We shape our environment and thereafter our environment shapes us."

-- Adaptation of a Winston Churchill quote

CHAPTER **5**:

INTERPRETING ART AND THE RIVER

This chapter will present a summary of my findings of over 40 arts and cultural projects produced along the three major segments of the Los Angeles River's downstream corridor: Glendale Narrows, Lower Arroyo Seco, and downtown Los Angeles. Given the random and often informal nature of these projects over the last 25 years, this chapter aims to catalogue and synthesize the over-arching patterns common in all projects. These include a general review of the project's background and process, geography and site-specificity, goals and intentions, personal connections, obstacles and challenges, and contemporary view and interpretation of the River space. Overall, the chapter explains and interprets artistic use of the River and offers a fuller understanding of the River as a civic space.

Now that the future of the Los Angeles River is in question, River artists consider their projects as tools to bridge divisions. "Culture is more organic on the River because the River is being used for what it is – it is not built off a trend. Even people who live in the River have their own culture, which like art along the River, is mostly unbeknownst to those outside of it," said one visual artist along the River. This culture is not a singular one, but rather one shared by many. Artists argue the future plans for the River must preserve and not compromise its past cultural identity. In fact, the River's challenged flooding history can be viewed through the lens of performance. "You can see its flooding as a performance because it completely changed the landscape of the [Los Angeles] basin," said cultural producer and Los Angeles Urban Ranger⁶⁰ Sara Daleiden. "The River is a document of culture - a spine running through the city," said urban planner and landscape designer Patty Lundeen. "While some people's connection to the river is one area, others feel a connection to the entire thing. People did not start to go down there because they love the River, they are down there because it's an opportunity to feel safe," she stated. These are just a few of the sentiments gleaned from analyzing art along the River. Overall, artists recognize their role to interpret the River in imaginative and contemporary ways.

BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

Artistic Medium

Projects along the River spanned every artistic medium and style, from traditional to new and contemporary forms of art. A full list of these projects is included in Appendice 4.1. They included:

- Visual Arts (painting, photography, sculpture, graffiti art)
- Performing/Literary Arts (dance, music, performance art, theater, poetry, literature)
- New Media Arts (film, multimedia art, digital media, digital mapping, GPS mobile tours)

Visual arts projects (specifically photography and steel sculpture) were the most popular artistic mediums on the River. They were followed by performing and literary arts projects (especially theater, dance, and poetry). Multidisciplinary projects are on the rise and experiential projects (tours and interactive arts activities) have begun to provide new opportunities for artistic engagement on the River.

⁶⁰ The Los Angeles Urban Rangers are a group of artists who interpret landscapes through the perspective of the United States National Park Service. They are known for their guided hikes, campfire talks, field kits, and other programs, especially their Malibu Public Beach Safari.

Themes

Themes artists chose to address in their creative River projects ranged from specific community based themes surrounding the River to more general and broader themes relevant to the entire region. Several projects also served as a platform to explicitly comment on larger global contemporary issues. While I suspected environmental restoration to serve as the predominant theme, this was overshadowed by the larger theme of civic space, access, and multiculturalism. In fact, more artists were inspired by the space surrounding the actual channel (levees, service roads, sand islands), rather than engaging with the water as a primary medium. In my observations, few of the projects I analyzed employed water as a critical element of their projects.

When compared to other competing planning agendas in Los Angeles such as education, housing, transportation, and immigration, artists along the River realized how often they were seen as a low-priority. As a result, many of these projects cross-cut themes in an attempt to solidify their relevance and ability to engage with community (more than half of the artists I interviewed expressed community engagement as part of their creative efforts). Themes included:

- Community Engagement and Community Preservation
- Censorship
- Multiculturalism and Prejudice
- Local History
- Civic Space
- Los Angeles Eastside
- Youth Advocacy and Engagement
- Art as Urban Design
- Urban Nature and Urban Decay
- Future Visions of Los Angeles
- Participatory Technology
- Environmental Stewardship and Education
(River revitalization, water conservation)

Formal/Informal

Considering the 40 artistic and cultural projects I analyzed during the course of my research, I suspected the majority to be informal in nature. This was due to the prevalence and popularity of informal artistic projects, ranging from graffiti art to site-specific dance. On the contrary, my findings showed that most of the projects were formal in their organization and execution, such as those supported by non-profit arts or environmental advocacy organizations such as the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) and North East Trees (NET) or artist collectives like the Arroyo Arts Collective. These projects represented a diverse group of artistic media, spanning the visual to the performing

arts. Overall, the approach to these projects – whether formal or informal – has proven less important than the value of its content. In the River, this is how art is perceived in a concrete void.

GEOGRAPHY/SITE-SPECIFICITY

Glendale Narrows

Geographically, the majority of the artistic and cultural projects I reviewed were sited along the Glendale Narrows portion of the River, between the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge to the Arroyo Seco Confluence. Spanning the community of Atwater Village and the Elysian Valley/Frogdown, one reason for the high amount of artistic and cultural activity is the area's central location to the city's historic and contemporary creative community of East and Northeast Los Angeles. Generating a multidisciplinary and highly representative mix of artistic media, no singular style or art form dominated another. Projects were also equally balanced between formal and informal projects. They ranged from Stephen Callis' Public Works photography series, the Arroyo Art Collective's River Visions and River Alchemy exhibitions, LA Yellow Box, Cornerstone Theater's Touch the Water: A River Play, Brett Goldstone's various sculptured gates, poetry by Lewis MacAdams, Russell C. Leong, and Huang Yibing, Llano del Rio's A Map for Another LA, Collage Dance Ensemble's Mother Ditch, the Del Rio exhibition by the Oakwood School and John Marshall High School, and Leo Limón's legendary River CATz.

A second observation about the outgrowth of artistic and cultural projects along the Glendale Narrows is attributed to the area's soft-bottom landscape. A unique feature when compared to the rest of the River's 52 miles, the Glendale Narrows has been the site of most of the River's public and infrastructural improvements over the last 20 years, from pocket parks to bicycle paths. This signals the City, County, and Army Corps of Engineers (Army Corps) recognition of the Glendale Narrows as a model and region that can raise consciousness and generate awareness about the future of the River, despite the engineering improbability of full concrete removal or the contentious debate to return other segments of the River to its soft bottom. As a result of benefitting from public improvements and infrastructure, the Glendale Narrows is also the most public accessible segment of the River – the one in which most people feel they are least trespassing.

Lower Arroyo Seco

As Los Angeles' most historic arts and cultural enclave, I suspected the Arroyo Seco would be a central venue for artistic and cultural projects along the River. On the contrary, only five projects were sited in the channel. Furthermore, these three projects (Meeting of Styles 2007, Stephan Kaplowitz: Task Force's Liquid Landscapes, Echo Park Film Center's *This is the LA River*, and Lewis MacAdams'

poetry) were often sited at the confluence of the Los Angeles River and the Arroyo Seco, below the Avenue 19 and San Fernando Road bridges in Lincoln Heights. Other projects such as the Occidental College's Urban Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI's) Re-envisioning the L.A. River series occurred in various sites along the River, including the 2003 production of Arroyo Fest which closed the entire length of the Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway, from Avenue 26 to Glenarm Avenue in Pasadena, for various cultural and environmental activities.

One artistic cultural activity most prevalent inside the Lower Arroyo Seco is tagging and graffiti arts. As noted by Chaz Bojorquez, the Lower Arroyo Seco was a haven for many Chicano youth and emerging artists who appropriated the space as a creative canvas. Whereas these artists in the 1960s and 1970s exerted their creativity in response to the Los Angeles' growing Chicano Art Movement, today's graffiti artists are reacting to an entire host of civic and cultural issues in their artwork. Nonetheless, the narrow space (when compared to other segments of the River, such as the Glendale Narrows), shorter levees, and lack of parking or access prove its potential difficulty for use as a stage. Additional public art projects along the Metro Gold Line Stations (Lincoln/Cypress Park, Heritage Square/Arroyo, and Southwest Museum), as well as sculptural artist Michael Amescua's Audubon Center metal gates, serve as River-inspired pieces, despite not being physically based in the River space. In general, the Arroyo Seco continues to be a cultural anchor for Los Angeles.

Downtown Los Angeles

The downtown Los Angeles segment of the River, from the Arroyo Seco Confluence to the Washington Boulevard Bridge, is perhaps the most visible and recognizable segment of the River. Apart from being the set for numerous film scenes, the area is traversed by a second hierarchy of concrete – ribbons of freeway interchanges, railroad infrastructure, and east-west arterial roads. Yet despite this utilitarian infrastructure, it also includes the largest span of historic River bridges dating back to Los Angeles' prime within the City Beautiful Movement. These bridges command historic and cultural significance – both as physical unifiers and as cultural barriers to the Eastside and other downstream communities. They have also served as iconic settings for artistic and cultural projects along the River.

Bill Johnson's L.A. River Bridges series focused on the five bridges from the North Broadway Bridge/Buena Vista Viaduct to the Olympic Boulevard Bridge/Ninth Street Viaduct. Ossues Labyrinth hung from the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct in their performance of THEM. Stephan Kaplowitz: TaskForce performed under the Spring Street Bridge at Farmlab/Metabolic Studio during their site-specific tour of Liquid Landscapes. Additional artistic and cultural projects reference the bridges in music, poetry, or exhibitions.

Apart from the bridges, like the Arroyo Seco, graffiti art is the other most prevalent form of cultural expression found along the downtown Los Angeles segment of the River. Examples range from smaller interventions under the bridges, along freeway on/off-ramps, throughout train cars, and across the length of the levees (primarily between the Cesar Chavez Avenue Bridge/Macy Street Viaduct) and the Olympic Boulevard Bridge/Ninth Street Viaduct. The most prominent examples includes SaberOne's "longest mural in the country" near the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct and MTA's piece spanning the length of the River from the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct to Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct, both which have now been whitewashed. Due to the River's high visibility and accessibility in this segment, similar projects have adapted to the space's under-the-radar nature. The prevalence of graffiti art may also be a result of the area's proximity to the predominantly Latino East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, where graffiti art has been appropriated as a form of cultural expression.

Equally significant is my observation that while most of these projects had River-wide portability, a large number of them were site-specific, depending on the availability and proximity of sand islands, bridges, access roads, vacant parcels, pocket parks, or engagement/support from a specific geographic or ethnic community.

GOALS AND INTENTIONS

The goals and intentions of artists along the River varied from the exercising of a basic human need for creative expression to specific interests for engaging people, instilling awareness, and re-interpretation of the River's image and role as a civic space in Los Angeles.

A Need to Engage in Creative Expression

There was a lack of civic space for creative expression in Los Angeles. This was the motivation for many of the creative projects occurring along the River. Artists who were often under-represented because of their own background or artistic practice claimed to enjoy a non-critical or non-commercially-driven freedom in the River space. Although Los Angeles has a vibrant arts and cultural ecology, many projects are only displayed in established museums or galleries. Only recently have some of the region's established cultural institutions turned their attention to temporary, non-mainstream, and increased public forms of creative expression. Notwithstanding, these projects typically do not receive the same type of support as traditional projects.

And while the River allowed artists to create in public, the accessibility issues surrounding the space made it difficult for these projects to have widespread patronage or attention. As a result, only

people familiar with accessing and navigating the River were aware of these projects, with the exception of large-scale graffiti art efforts – Meeting of Styles 2007, SaberOne’s piece near the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct, and MTA’s mural – that often reach spectacular proportions due to media coverage or international interest in Los Angeles’ street art. According to my interview with Professor Robert Gottlieb at Occidental College’s UEPI, “We would like more people to talk about the River. This keeps it alive and in the hands of the community – art is one way to encourage people to express their feelings about the River.”

A Need to Engage Independently and Externally

Artistic and cultural projects along the River facilitated both independent and external forms of civic engagement in some of Los Angeles’s most fragmented communities. The increase in interactive and dialogue-based art projects such as LA Yellow Box, UCLA REMAP’s Junction, and the Echo Park Film Center’s *This is the LA River* mini-documentary have intended to repair, re-establish, or build new relationships between upstream and downstream communities. “If we did nothing else,” said Julie Hérbert, writer of Cornerstone Theater’s *Touch the Water: A River Play*, “we brought people down to the River, many of which it was their first time.” Not-for-profit advocacy based groups like FoLAR’s support of creative projects like the Arroyo Art Collective’s site-specific *River Visions* and River Alchemy has earned new volunteers to the FoLAR’s *La Gran Limpieza: The Great L.A. River Clean-up*. These projects have led to a stronger, more informed, and more distributed constituency across the Los Angeles basin (no longer just River-adjacent advocates).

A Need to Secure the Value of Art in Urban Revitalization

Artistic and cultural projects along the River offered a vehicle to inform, challenge, and support complex urban revitalization efforts in Los Angeles. The desire for adequate civic spaces for creative expression echoes people’s desire to connect on a human level. The work of artists along the River has helped people discover, re-discover, or re-appropriate it as a civic space that is not wholly visible. These projects have also taken people on an experiential journey and have created opportunities for cultural activity where social interaction has become a meaningful tool to systemically affect behavior, not just communicate a message. When asked about the value of his work, Brett Goldstone remarked “My gates are a way to see visions and image of nature in urban areas and pocket parks, despite the real image being arrested.” Similarly for artist and River advocate Nicole Possert, “Art is a way to reframe the current complexities of the River and help drive a new, different, and necessary discussion about the River’s future – a new and valuable mode of civic engagement.”

For other artistic projects along the River, the goal was to challenge artists to reframe and reconsider the complex issues that surround the River through the execution and depth of their projects. According to Stephan Kaplowitz, "My goal is to create artistic projects that are more about the people, less about the art. Art can be powerful because artists like to see what's there and share perceptions of reality with people. People who are not traditionally interested in art get to feel more present by stopping to think about it."

For public agencies working to develop public policy around the uses of the River, the challenge lies in expanding perceived notions and limitations that go beyond the traditional public art paradigm. "Our goal [in addressing public art policy along the River] is to expand the notion of the definition of art in a contemporary way while respecting basic life-safety, conservation, and regulatory issues," said Pauline Kamiyama, a Public Art Officer for the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA). "The future of the River should not be comprised of a few elite projects. Art should create a dialogue about ideas and spaces. If not, then there's something wrong." In this sense, the River should be a place for both the standard, traditional projects and contemporary, innovative art projects Los Angeles is known for – temporary projects, new media projects, street art. Joe Linton described it best when he said "Part of art's beauty is its ability to allow people to express themselves - where people feel free to do their own thing without high regulation."

A Need to Raise Awareness about the Future of the River

Art projects along the River have significantly raised a newfound consciousness and awareness of the River space. Whether through FoLAR's support of events that occur along the River or through projects like KCET's Departures: L.A. River, art is one of the primary reasons why people discover the River space. Seeing art along the River is, for the most part, free. "The goal of Departures is to get more people involved civically in the future of the River. Currently KCET is focused on Education and Information. Civic Engagement is the next element of having people find what to do and how to sustain their involvement (through River clean-ups, etc.)," said Juan Devis, Director of New Media at KCET. This awareness has also created space for new collaborations and partnerships and has broadened how people engage in the planning process. It has also developed new ways to gather and share information that is relative, interesting, engaging, and creative. This ultimately allows for larger ways on how to use the River. Over the course of master planning for the River, a majority of the River's projects have occurred in the period after the publication of the County of Los Angeles *Los Angeles River Master Plan (LARMP)* in 1996 and before the adoption of the City of Los Angeles *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)* in 2007. The majority of the projects created in this 11-year period

occurred along the Glendale Narrows, followed by the Lower Arroyo Seco. Few projects were sited along downtown Los Angeles. For those that were, they accounted for the majority of art projects created before the *LARMP* in 1996.

A Need to Creatively Activate Derelict Spaces

Derelict spaces were breeding grounds for creative expression in Los Angeles. Although most of the art occurring along the River is not officially sanctioned, these arts and cultural projects have not only represented the River's history and future plans, but have also proposed new ways to interact with the River space. This has been especially true for establishing a new constituency of River advocates, patrons, and supporters who are not located adjacent to the River space. For public agencies, creative projects in the derelict River space have signaled the need to address the River's future and incorporate multiple benefits into the planning process beyond the standard engineering and infrastructural perspective. "The key thing that drew artists down to the River was that it was a wasteland. It was empty, available, and massive - there was space for everyone. Artists are always looking for a blank canvas," stated Brett Goldstone.

A Need to Include Youth Engagement

A lack of arts education and youth-oriented cultural facilities and programs in Los Angeles accounted for youth reactions on the River. Youth living near the River's dense and primarily low-income downstream corridor communities commented that the River provided a creative canvas amidst a lack of arts education in the region's public schools or safe access to open space. That Los Angeles has one of the lowest park acreage per resident ratios of any large city is not new information.

Access to the beach was too far and local parks like Elysian Park and Griffith Park did not provide the non-traditional spaces for creative expression. Although people think they can use it like the beach, the River is not the same type of space. "You can't blame kids from the Eastside for taking on the River as an art project. It's not like we have places to go to or schools to teach us," said one youth photographer I encountered along the River.

Many of these youth are involved with tagging and graffiti art. In order to maintain their creativity, but channel their energies in legal ways, groups like ARTScorpsLA⁶¹ created programs where graffiti artists in the Arroyo Seco would talk to local schools about the history of street art. These artists would also have the opportunity to conduct their art on free walls in ARTScorpsLA's Tierra de la Culebra Art Park near the Arroyo Seco in Highland Park. In exchange for community service,

⁶¹ The organization changed their name to Art...Community...Land...Activism! in 2006.

graffiti artists and taggers contributed to building the panels and work with legal venues. Programs like these achieved their goal in keeping the artistry alive, but channeling artistic sensibilities into legal ways. According to artist and producer of the youth-driven *This is the LA River* mini-documentary, Lisa Marr, "Youth should have a creative outlet to re-appropriate and discover the space."

A Need to Conserve Water and Protect the Environment

Arts and cultural projects along the River offered a new way to teach people about the critical water issues facing Los Angeles. Historically the basis for the City's existence, the Los Angeles River and its associated watershed are inextricably tied to the region's development. As one of the Los Angeles' most pressing planning agendas, these projects have offered new and creative ways to approach critical water issues. Artistic and cultural projects with this goal included KCET's *Departures: L.A. River*, UEPI's *Re-envisioning the L.A. River* series, Stephan Kaplowitz: TaskForce's *Liquid Landscapes*, and Jenny Price's River tours.

First, these projects help frame the way we consider urban nature in a metropolis. Nature is all around us and whereas the River is not a typical park or green space, it offers a unique linearity and respite to the artists that engage with the River space.

Second, these projects help create a bridge between elected officials and the public, many of them focused on access issues and a general perception of realizing that the River, although no longer the primary source of water for the region, is still an important natural and cultural resource.

Third, these projects have created new opportunities for organizations to collaborate for multi-use options in the River's future. "The City should see that the tools you have to make a place in a neighborhood are more based in relationships - it's a negotiation," said Joe Linton. "I am interested in what people can do to take charge and address issues in their neighborhoods rather than waiting for the public agencies to fix them. The arts are one way to realize this." Despite these specific projects, overall, artists also offer that more people are interested in the River as a space, rather than an experience to engage and touch the water. The actual River itself is often secondary. Very few of the artists I interviewed credit engagement with the River's water as their draw to the River space - most of the projects were drawn to the space because of the opportunity to engage with its hardscapes (the concrete levees, service roads, storm drains, and adjacent pocket parks).

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

A Value for People with Local, Native Connections

Despite its concretized and derelict nature, the River held strong symbolic meaning and association for both those who grew up with it and people who had recently discovered it. While the general public may view the River as a under used and unattractive space for active and passive recreation, artists have derived tremendous meaning from the resource. As a community of people who have consistently engaged with the River over the last 25 years, as well as the group that initially catalyzed FoLAR and other non-profit advocacy groups, artists gain a distinct satisfaction by interpreting the space creatively. Sometimes they are called to action by learning about the River's challenged history while other times they are influenced by its concrete, trapezoidal form. Overall, the majority of artistic and cultural projects are oriented for public display rather than for personal value, and created by artists with native or local ties to the River's adjacent downstream communities.

Artistic and cultural projects along the River may use their native or childhood associations with the River to express their relationship with it. "People who live near the River have a strong connection to it. It is also a playground for lots of the kids on the Eastside - like the beach. It is the bloodline of Los Angeles. It belongs to everyone, but the City is too proprietary about it," said Ivan, a graffiti artist I found along the River. "Growing up in Highland Park, the River was my playground. My initial work with the River as a subject was landscape painting, then I turned to graffiti art, where I was influenced by the over 200 writers along the River in the 1960s and 1970s. I helped to organize legal walls, but graffiti artists don't write on legal walls," commented Chaz Bojorquez.

Although Bojorquez always knew he wanted to be an artist, he did not realize he would bring culture to the River in such a large way. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the Los Angeles' Chicano Art Movement began to rebel against mainstream, elitist, and culturally exclusive and hegemonic programming prevalent in arts and cultural venues. As a result, Chicanos and other under-represented minorities turned to graffiti art as viable art form.

"For lots of Chicanos, graffiti is an important cultural language and style in what we have to offer. Our graffiti is written for Los Angeles, not for others. The L.A. River was very much a Chicano river," said Bojorquez. "Graffiti is pride. It is a public announcement. A tag is someone else's need to be identified – it says a lot about larger issues in L.A."

The Value for the Downstream Corridor's Eastside Communities

The River's central downstream location served as an inspiration to downstream artists. Stemming from its strong Chicano cultural associations, it is no surprise that the River is an important space across many of Los Angeles' downstream communities. In many ways, the River is the gateway to the Eastside.

Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley has mountains and canyons, Santa Monica, Malibu, Venice, and Long Beach have the beach and ocean, and East Los Angeles has the River. It is a part of their daily life.

According to writer, poet, and cultural leader Luis Rodriguez:

"I always thought the River had a decent life filled with cultural resources. For many the River is neglected, put down, and abused. But people in East L.A. who did not have the access to get out - they were surrounded by suburban areas and white people, which made them feel uncomfortable. For them, Los Angeles was downtown and the River was their gateway - they didn't go beyond that."

Conversely, over the last 25 years, the once nascent but now formidable debates on the future of the River have produced a new consciousness and interest in artists beyond the River-adjacent communities. For example, although the River wasn't a part of the daily lives of arts groups like Heidi Duckler's College Dance Theater and Osseus Labyrinth, they were always curious and inspired by the River space, especially from a performance perspective. Because the River did not fit any conventional norms regarding any space (let alone other rivers), artists co-opted the space to reflect on aesthetics, beauty, and hydrology.

By engaging creatively, artists along the River have proven that the space does not have to look universally attractive to have meaning or be successful. It is unique - an underlying current that the space is unprecedented and without equal, therefore making it a difficult task to find "best practice" models. "No one will say no to our revitalizing the River because we've never dealt with this before," stated Lupe Vela, Policy Director at the City of Los Angeles Ad Hoc River Committee. According to Lisa Marr, "The production of *This is the LA River* was an education for everyone involved. Many students live near the River, but few had actually seen it. They were fascinated by the graffiti - it opened their eyes to larger informal art forms."

A Strong Symbolism and Meaning

Artists engaged with the River have been inspired by its transitional nature and multiple meanings. Although the River's popular external image remains a giant culvert, areas like the Glendale Narrows' soft bottom have begun to redefine the image. But for the areas that are not soft bottom, how do people live in harmony with nature? In bike rides along the River from Long Beach to downtown Los Angeles, Joe Linton's motivation was "I was curious about how people interact with urban nature and how we live in harmony with it." The River is interesting because it illustrates the notion of myth. Myth is important in Los Angeles in particular because the geography of the River makes it a good landscape for secrets," said Katie Bachler, an artist and member of the Llano del Rio Collection, who investigated part of the River's meaning and symbolism for a map titled *A Map for Another LA*.

"The symbolism of the River is hyper-real – you need to engage with the River as a metaphor or in other ways. It has flora and fauna, bird migration, neighborhoods, gangs, diverse groups of people with various needs/interests," commented Juan Devis. "*Departures: L.A River* was a way of creating a record of the good, bad, and ugly parts of the River - didn't just want to focus on one group, but many." For Patty Lundeen, she had previous knowledge and interest in the space. "I was always fascinated and curious about it as a water feature designer. I started helping FoLAR to teach kids on walks about watershed. Over time these activities became more hands on and interactive. Combined, the vast symbolism and meaning associated with the River alludes to its future potential.

CHANGES IN REACTION

(after visiting, engaging with, or producing art projects along the River space)

Apart from creating physical interventions in the River space, artistic and cultural production has also been successful in shifting social, cultural, physical, and political attitudes and opinions about the River's negative image. Now that the space is changing, the public has grown more interested and engaged with the ways it is changing. It has transferred people's perception of the space and has built public support in the process.

Increase in External Projects (occurring outside of the River space)

Based on content and the current transitional state of the River, a new generation of amateur and professional artists are engaging in projects inspired by the River, but not necessarily physically located in the River. These include a rise in museum and gallery exhibitions and multimedia projects – a concerted effort to reach a larger audience. It is for this reason, in part, the River space commands a strong and renown significance. Furthermore, as opening access to the River is still a primary goal of the *LARRMP*, the general feeling is that it feels riskier for artists now than several years ago. According to one street artist who has often created work on the River, "Ever since they whitewashed the MTA letters from the River (near the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct) and arrested the crew, people are afraid to come down here."

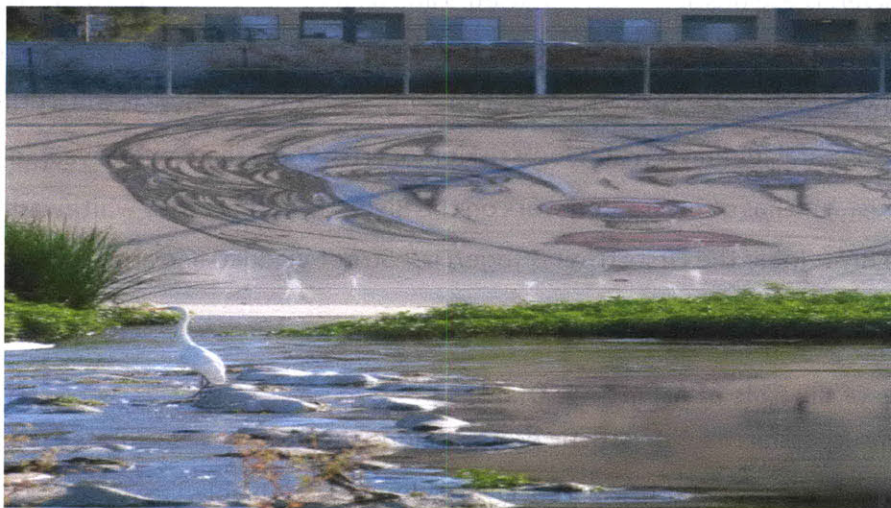
Renewed Value of the Role of Art in Civic Dialogue

Another successful reaction artistic projects along the River have facilitated is a renewed sense of value of the arts as an integral part of civic dialogue. Undeniably, Los Angeles is a city dominated by real estate forces. Considering the current economic crisis, a decline in the market

affects many other issues. Artistic projects along the River have helped illustrate the engaging value of the arts. First, the arts can be a low-cost, temporary, and short-term solution to urban redevelopment projects. Second, people are looking for participatory reasons to interact with the River space. Third, the artistic legacy along the River is being honored and commemorated, from books and associated exhibitions such as the *Ulysses Guide to the LA River, Volume 1* and *Río L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River* to exhibitions, film, and multimedia projects. Fourth, youth have grown more interested in the role of street art in cities. And finally, perceptions of graffiti have changed from negative vandalism to "an important part of our urban fabric." This was evident in Crewest Gallery and ManOne's staging of River City Visions, an exhibition of River-inspired graffiti artists installed as a result of the highly controversial Meeting of Styles event and the youth perceptions of the River's graffiti expressed in the *This is the LA River* mini-documentary. River-adjacent youth revisited their perspectives in *Persistence of Vision*, a subsequent film produced by the Echo Park Film Center.

Re-interpretation of Graffiti Art

Graffiti art along the River has also been the subject of scholarly interest in Italy and Japan through *The Art and Life of Chaz Bojorquez*. For Leo Limón, his work with the River CATz has gone from being classified as illegal to being acknowledged and honored as local legend by the City of Los Angeles. And Luis Rodriguez has gone from his early gang life to being a respected cultural leader and award winning poet and writer for his stories about growing up near the River. Landscape photographer Bill Johnson stated "People's perception of the concrete has changed - now people have found beauty in it. As the water flows, you see aggregates - layers with polished concrete. River flooding wipes out things in its path and changes the landscape."



A large graffiti silhouette of a woman crying in the Elysian Valley.
© Google Images

Redefining Urban Nature

Overall, people are redefining a new concept of urban nature in Los Angeles. No longer are people longing for pastoral settings. Sara Daleiden said the following:

"The idea of nature in Los Angeles is sublime and the L.A. River is a primary place where we can get that. But does it have to be green or can it be concrete? Green is not the only way to see landscape. People want more design strategies that make pathways into social contexts. Social programming is very important, in some ways more than the physical design of the River."

According to Stephan Kaplowitz of TaskForce, perceptions of participants greatly changed after his dance tour of Liquid Landscapes. People who had lived in Los Angeles their whole life got a chance to see the River in different ways. "Through the production of Liquid Landscapes, I saw a side of Los Angeles I never new existed," he said. This shift is a welcome and necessary one that will assist in incorporating all forms of art in the upcoming River art policy.

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES

Whether formal or informal, artistic and cultural projects along the River are constantly challenged with a variety of political and physical obstacles and barriers. Dominated by a concern for flooding, life-safety, and engineering, the River's current assembly of governance does not allow for a system to execute, approve, or maintain artistic interventions and creative projects along the River space. Of the many obstacles and challenges these projects face, the most primary include issues such as governance/jurisdiction, permitting, over-regulation, access and safety, wayfinding, awareness, physical barriers, and traditionalism the planning process.

Governance/Jurisdiction

Navigating a complex system of governance was the most difficult challenge for artists on the River. Along its 52 miles, there are at least 30 various public agencies, municipalities, water districts, and private individuals⁶² that maintain ownership rights along the River space. The main three agencies include:

- City of Los Angeles (which controls maintenance, security, and liability issues, specifically along the service roads atop of the levees through an agreement with the Army Corps)
- County of Los Angeles (which controls the main channel and the levees through an agreement with the Army Corps)

⁶² Remaining easements from early eminent domain actions along the Glendale Narrows during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.

- Army Corps of Engineers (which has transferred most of its local government functions to the City and County of Los Angeles via a Mutual Understanding Agreement - MUA)⁶³

"Everything along the river is a grey zone," said Patty Lundeen. "If you were to take a section of the river, you would see multiple owners. This reflects the complexities of land ownership and shows why it's difficult to get anything done on the River. Anything one group agrees to affects another group's ownership or liability issues of the River."

It is clear there are too many agencies involved at local regional, and national levels to develop a manageable network of governance. Not only is this confusing for the public, but it leaves a margin for a lack of accountability for public officials. According to Shelly Backlar, executive director of FoLAR "Governance is the main issue – cooperation between the City, County, and Army Corps. It has been strained, difficult, and almost non-existent since FoLAR started, but now more partnerships are developing."

Los Angeles does not have historical memory. A sentiment echoed in Norman Klein's *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, Los Angeles often has difficulty seeing its complexity. This creates a large challenge regarding the contemporary discourse along the River.

Depending on how it is framed and discussed, the problems facing the River become more real. Currently people in Los Angeles interpret the River as an uncontrolled and unmanaged River. Although in theory controls are in place, they are rarely enforced. Yet, in the absence of a dominant narrative, smaller narratives can fill the voice. For artists, the River's revitalization efforts raises a question as to how many art activities will be compromised by new or restructured forms of governance.

"Revitalize the River for whom?" How can future improvements and interventions along the River serve multiple needs and perspectives? As we consider ways to get people involved with the River, it is important to realize how art can be a unifying tool. The mere building of a park does not equate to community representation, therefore it is critical so that the River's governing structure consider the landscape of the River in different ways. "The city will always be inevitably regimented," said one photographer along the River. "You can't stop that or freeze things. The River is complex and will remain politically as such. It's a place where the spirit of anarchy rules – but this has to be accepted by all the political forces behind the River."

⁶³ This MUA requires these agencies and partners to meet on a monthly basis to discuss issues relative to maintenance, liability, flood control, and funding. According to the agreement, this MUA needs to exist with the County (from the City) for any project that is approved. Considering the amount of time lost in transaction costs, the MUA was created to streamline planning along the River.

Permitting

For artists, it was nearly impossible to find the appropriate office or agency that approves art projects along the River. In the past, artists and arts organizations that have tried to secure arts-related permits have found a lack of existing policy, despite art being one of the most popular and recognized activities occurring along the River⁶⁴. As a result, many bypass artistic and cultural projects bypass the permitting process. In many ways, this has allowed for more interesting, contemporary, and avant-garde art making along the River space.

In 2007, Crewest Gallery and ManOne Designs secured a permit approved by the County of Los Angeles to produce Meeting of Styles 2007. Despite this formality, the event proved to be controversial and set a tone for graffiti art and public expression in Los Angeles. It also highlighted the weakness in the County's liability. Beyond proper public policies, a lack of centralized permitting and acknowledgement of people's interest for wanting to interact with the public creatively. In 1995, Collage Dance Theater proceeded with the same reasoning. After securing a formal permit from the County of Los Angeles, press coverage about the ensemble's dance piece near the Los Feliz Boulevard/Tropico Bridge resulted in a stern call from the County regarding major concerns about life safety issues. When Osseus Labyrint could not secure a permit to perform *THEM* on the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct in 1999, they opted for a film permit instead – a permit that was much easier to secure.

There currently does not exist a centralized River permitting office for any permits, artistic or otherwise, but a cooperative advising committee is being organized to also look at project management and agendas. Permits are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, making it difficult for artists to secure any type of project, formal or informal. In these instances, site-specific pieces are often more challenged, especially due to the few precedents on how to program arts and cultural activities along the River. However, even after the permitting is in place, how can artists along the River determine acceptance and success in the eyes of public policy? This is by far one of the greatest obstacles facing artists along the River.

Over-Regulation

Both artists and public policy makers agreed that over-regulation may compromise the current artistic and cultural legacy along the River. According to the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los

⁶⁴ According to an informal conversation with Lupe Vela, Policy Director at the City of Los Angeles Ad Hoc River Committee, who informed me that requests for arts and cultural project permits are some of the most popular requests the Committee receives.

Angeles (DCA), who is assisting the Ad Hoc River Committee with shaping public art policy, "The City has to be concerned with safety, liability, and process, but how can the City encourage artistic activity without being oppressive? DCA is exploring ways on how to do things differently, while still adhering to the same concerns." As a result of strict over-regulation in civic space, it is difficult to know what spaces are truly public – if any at all. Felicia Filer, Director of Public Art at the DCA, stated:

"There is no such thing as a truly public space in Los Angeles – there are more rules on what you can't do than what you can, thereby limiting how the public can use civic spaces. Although the Planning Department can regulate the streetscape, they cannot look comprehensively at the city from the standpoint of planning public spaces and public buildings– their hands are tied. If planning could serve a different role and function that was not so limited, but could make inroads into municipal and civic systems, there could be room for change. Additionally, as it relates to public art The DCA has been limited in what it can do because of existing ordinances and funding sources, many of which were established 20 years ago and based on models that were necessary in local urban development at the time. Ideally, changes in urban development systems will enable the city to update how public art can function in these new systems."

In regards to the *LARRMP*, River-based artists are concerned the plan will create more regulation and political obstacles. Considering that uncoordinated efforts have already resulted in arcane policies, these feelings are understandable. According to Brett Goldstone:

"There are too many regulations in place for people to be able to use the River in all ways. The Master Plan will just create more of them. It will sanitize everything, but what is going on now and has gone on before is part of the value of Los Angeles' culture - these artistic interventions have social meaning. Without respect for these projects and the cultural legacy they offer, the period for the River's interesting art projects will be over."

Access and Safety

The omnipresent sense of trespassing was both a thrill and a problem for artistic and cultural projects along the River. Although artists acknowledge the concern and necessity for life-safety precautions, the larger problem stems from a control issue. "Why do we always feel like we're trespassing," said Lisa Marr of the Echo Park Film Center. "Who's River is it anyway?" "The River is right in the middle of everything, but even getting there is kind of scary. When you do, it is a haven for those who don't want to be bothered," said Chris, a graffiti artist along the River.

This calls to mind the challenges that define a good civic space. What would make the River a successful civic space and who will decide? "People have different interpretations of the cultural stuff. The River needs to have enough safety and flexibility to manage the corridor. Realistically, public agencies can balance the pragmatic level of access and control by incorporating arts and culture in planning, land-use, and policy. "Currently there are not enough places for youth or anyone to engage in Los Angeles," said Chaz Bojorquez. "You can't even do a mural because it's illegal right now - you can't get a permit. It's all about liability and safety." A strong advocate for creative expression along

the River, City Councilman Ed Reyes stated “Public safety needs to be foremost as the River’s primary function, but it doesn’t have to compromise artistic engagement.”



The Los Angeles River near Main Street in Lincoln Heights.
© Unknown source

Wayfinding

Another barrier to access of artistic and creative projects along the River is a lack of wayfinding and navigation signage. If you are to find your way to the River, it is difficult to tell how far along you can safely traverse the space. “When people get to the River, we don’t want them to get lost. Signage can be artistic, use local materials, and create jobs,” said Carol Armstrong, Project Director for the Los Angeles River office at the City of Los Angeles Bureau of Engineering. Furthermore, even when you find it, planning, politics, and development need to fall in place – a rare occasion in Los Angeles. An additional challenge lies in how to equitably connect the River with the region, even in areas where the River doesn’t pass. Although artists have found their way to navigate the River space, the general public, whether accidentally or purposely intending to see their space, notes lack of parking, amenities – call boxes, restrooms, rest places, drinking fountains. “Unlike in most cities, the River is a space we are allowed to use,” commented James Rojas, transportation planner, artist, and FoLAR board member.

Awareness

Artistic and cultural projects along the River have helped to increase awareness and consciousness about the River's existence. Although these activities have commented that they are discovering the River for the first time, in fact the River is not a new civic space – it just hasn't been activated. That is where artists come in. They harbor an interest to express and learn about what is down there, even if they don't completely understand the complexities surrounding the physical space. Public artist Katie Bachler commented:

"The River is not a part of Los Angeles' nature system – it is not our primary source of water and not a traditional space like a beach or a park. People talk about the River as "other" - an abject space. The idea to turn the River into a linear park is complicated because you can't put a park in a City that has few and expect people will know how to use it."

Patty Lundeen stated:

"The average person doesn't know the L.A. River is there or where it is at, even if they lived close to it. For you and I, the River is visible. For people around it, they don't know what it is and always pass it. I'm constantly surprised how off it is in people's radar. There are good and bad things about that, but for people to use it as a platform, awareness is important to get people to talk about it. The arts help this."

Physical Barriers

Many artists stated that the scale of physical barriers along the River is too large to comprehend – geographically and spatially. It is one of the largest non-accessible spaces in a sprawling city, where one-third of the green space is located on traffic medians or freeways⁶⁵. Not only is the area crossed by heavy transportation corridors (freeways, parkways, cargo railroad infrastructure, light rail), it is also surrounded by dead end streets, homeless encampments, and a proliferation of light industrial land uses, mostly in the form of operating textile factories and food distribution centers. It is shielded from the community. Alicia Brown, a long-time native resident and community advocate of Solano Canyon and member of the LARRMP Advisory Board stated:

"The River is inspiring to look at, but a lot of cultural projects have not come from Solano Canyon. Artists in the area show in Chinatown and the Artist District. Although there is an interest to show in the River, it's difficult to get to from our community given all the freeways and warehouses. Instead my community prefers to enjoy recreation at El Rio de Los Angeles State Park in Taylor Yard."

Another local River-adjacent resident, Patty Lundeen, echoed Brown's statement in her observation that the River was "The only River I'm aware of where all the backs of warehouses face the waterfront - it's fundamentally strange. Although this is the current configuration, there is an opportunity to change that. It requires a fundamental orientation of the River." For the communities

⁶⁵ A fact according to Ari Kletzky, Director of Islands of L.A., a citywide public art project that activates traffic medians through cultural activities.

that about the Elysian Valley, a lack of street access makes the River their default public face. “We would like to open up the back gate to the River, but it’s hard to have a public presence in it,” said one community resident. Whereas River planning has historically focused on engineering, flood control, and environmental needs, the River’s largest planning challenge is now how to reconstruct nature and realize ideas that benefit multiple perspectives.

Traditionalism in Planning for the River

Despite being a world-class center of creativity, artists did not feel involved or valued in the public planning or development processes. Instead, they argue that thinking and strategy behind large-scale urban revitalization initiatives is often too traditional. When asked about the *LARRMP*’s effect on the River’s future, many artists felt that the projects were too safe or removed from true engagement with the River and its users. Going back to the pervasive thinking of engineering, flood control, and life-safety measures that have fundamentally dictated planning along the River since the 1930s, artists felt that the City, County, and Army Corps lacked the awareness to understand the value of existing artistic practices along the River.

For example, the *LARRMP* calls for a series of pocket parks and outdoor amphitheaters. Dance and performance groups like Collage Dance Theater, Stephan Koplowitz: TaskForce, and Osseus Labyrinth similarly commented that a growing trend in performing and visual arts is site-specific work – moving away from pre-constructed stages and spatial gestures in order to have a deeper connection with the environment. No longer was one space a stage, but rather the entire landscape. This tension signals a need for finding a balance in the River as a regional resource. Artists are also concerned that the *LARRMP* is too uniform and opportunistic, borrowing best practices from other cities, but not recognizing the unique cultural and physical geography that is Los Angeles. According to artist, River advocate, and local resident Nicole Possert:

“Planners in Los Angeles aren’t generalists and therefore do not approach the River with out-of-the-box thinking. Planning in L.A. is segmented and too specialized – it needs to look at things from a variety of angles and consider the social, not just physical, aspects of a project – everything can’t be about infrastructure and engineering. There used to be a commitment to civic beauty during Merrill Butler’s tenure and the City Beautiful Movement of the early 20th century, but that no longer exists. How can we plan for the River if we can’t get people to talk, understand, and agree upon larger common goals?”

CONTEMPORARY VIEW/INTERPREATION OF THE RIVER

The Los Angeles River is an atypical river often challenged by traditional notions of what a River should be and often physically looks in other cities. For artists, the challenge is translated to how to address the realities of the River through arts and cultural projects.

"My first impression of the River was that it is a bizarre space that is un-definable. It takes on so many different forms and environmental traumas. I grew up in New York with a different image of a river, but the Los Angeles River challenged my notion of it. I found it fascinating and as the most avant-garde River I've ever seen, which inspired me to do something creative on it," said Stephan Kaplowitz of TaskForce.

Considering that the River itself is an important, but often secondary, feature for artists, artistic projects continue to interpret the River as a gigantic civic space including the flood control channel, trapezoidal walls, and adjacent service roads and pedestrian multi-use pathways and landscaping. Their projects have served to both document and create amidst the River's rapid changes. Although it is a prime resource for Los Angeles, it has been neglected too long. In analyzing the most prominent interpretations artists have associated with the River, my analysis showed that the city's perception of the River was not about the River itself, but rather a conduit for a larger debate to define civic space in Los Angeles, as well as how people adapt to it.

River as an Open Canvas

It is no surprise that nearly all of the artists I interviewed along the River viewed the space as an open canvas. They described it as an organic space that is both emotionally and physically inspiring, despite its abject nature. In their quest to locate artistic expression in less conventional spaces, they have found beauty in its concrete and decay, and have appropriated meaning to these forms.

As a result, they also argue against any drastic physical or policy interventions that will comprise their connection. "The River is beautiful already – there is no need to make drastic changes. There is a current obsession with getting rid of everything and starting new. That's why I find the *LARRMP* is problematic," said Fabian Wagmeister of UCLA's REMAP. "Artistically, the River is a self-made amphitheater. When you're in the River there is a sense of awareness. It is powerful. It is a space that resonates with creativity."

James Rojas believes that the "River is a blank canvas that generates a process of creative thinking, especially through informal activities – a proverbial space." As an important space for artistic and cultural production, the under-the-radar nature has inspired a legion of street artists. The majority of these are graffiti artists. For them "Graffiti is something that will never be stopped. There has to be an acknowledgement that public art and the River have a place - it's 52 miles of a concrete canvas," said Lewis MacAdams. In speaking to both artists and community members along the River, many lament the whitewashing of the Graffiti of Styles 2007 murals, SaberOne's piece, or the MTA piece. "The River is not a throw away like many people think - the walls have been there as galleries for its communities and should remain as such," said Chaz Bojorquez. "The River influenced me and still does. Street art, especially within the Los Angeles River, has become a big thing in places."

Other artists and cultural projects recognized the value of the River as an open canvas, but argued that fellow artists needed to be realistic about their uses. These artists supported projects that had larger community engagement, rather than personal, implications. Artists who had already produced work along the River felt that the River's period as an open canvass was slowly fading as a result of opportunistic power plays between the corporate elite and the community. With that in mind, these artists suggested that other artists use their work to not make personal statements about themselves, but rather broadly define the River as the solution to Los Angeles' lack of civic space.

River as a Policy Implication

When considering the implications that arts and culture may have regarding policy and planning along the River, the danger of proposing new policy measures and regulations became widely apparent. In the majority of the conversations I had with River-based artists, many appreciated the lack of enforced rules of the space. Although they did not appreciate being an under-represented voice in the River's future, they maintained a larger concern about compromised creativity. For them, their inspiration to engage in the River-space came from it being a neutral and self-generated civic space. As a flood control channel, the River was never intended for recreational use. Nevertheless, artists, the homeless, recreational users, and even gang members have learned to negotiate the River space without organized protocols. Despite their ability to thrive within this non-regulated environment, current and future real estate-driven and development-oriented pressures from the Metro Gold Line Eastside extension, the City of Los Angeles' Adaptive Reuse Ordinance, and numerous mixed-used developments along the River will make it difficult for artistic and creative projects to continue without the organized policy measures.

River as a Space that is Beautiful and Disgusting...

The River was a memorable space that overwhelms due to its physicality in infrastructure, scale, and materials. "The River is beautiful in some respects, but disgusting in others - just like life," stated one graffiti artist. When the River was paved in concrete, it transformed Los Angeles and left a huge gash," remarked Mia Leher, the lead project architect for the LARRMP and a resident of the River's adjacent Atwater Village community. "By virtue of being the only piece of large infrastructure on a grade in the City of Los Angeles, it has an amazing ability to unify and bring people together. It is just as beautiful as any other River - just a different kind of beauty. You just can't get next to it and you have to know where to find it."

The River is never going to be a pristine River and for some it is more than just a drainage channel – it is a strange hybrid of a natural system and a man-made system of culture and politics

working with and against each other. This image calls to mine an anecdote from Patty Lundeen, describing an initial conversation she had with a landscape architecture professor during her graduate studies. In considering the Army Corps concretization of the River, Lundeen's professor stated: "You have to make friends with the Army Corps - you can't ignore them and you have to appreciate what they've done, even if you don't agree. What they did was considered progress at the time." Seeing the River through multiple lenses, Lundeen agrees:

"I love the River and the concrete - it is so monumental. The river is like L.A.'s cathedral. People go there to find peace. When I go down there I feel a sense of freedom that I don't feel when I go to Griffith Park, Elysian Park, or the other few green spaces in the area. It's a sense of opportunity. In certain parts you know you're not supposed to be there - it's a grey area - but at the same time you realize you can do things that people don't care about. It is dirty and it floods and washes things out. It is like an Etch-A-Sketch. It creates opportunities for people to do things, but they are all temporary, and then they go away. That is both the beauty and challenge about it."

Summary of Interpretation

After reviewing over 40 artistic and cultural projects, it was evident that the River space benefitted tremendously from a lack of formal design and a lack of rule and regulation. In fact, many artists used my interview as an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of their work, and those who came before them. And while many of these projects were created as conduits to raise consciousness about the River, engage with local communities, and catalyze adjacent improvements, other projects were personal in nature. Overall, these projects responded to a concern for the River's potential over-commodification, as well as a general lack of civic space and venues for non-traditional and contemporary modes of creative expression in Los Angeles.

The outgrowth of art along the River presented alternative ways to illustrate powerful new ideas for the future of the River. Considering that art is the purist manifestation of civil society, this also solidified the role of art to influence future urban planning and urban design interventions on the River. Having operated in the River space for over 25 years, the knowledge, personal connections, and intentions of the River's artists prominently position them to re-imagine the River.

However, the lessons learned from these artists provided more than just instructions for how to support the work of artists on the River. They are lessons about how to understand and transform the River space in a flexible and responsive manner that celebrates the current social and cultural context of the city, rather than merely prioritizing economic and political forces. In essence, artists on the River have provided a new agenda for the shaping of civic space in Los Angeles. Their intrepid nature has afforded them a command of the River space and their ideas on how to address the future of the River, in typical artist fashion, are not resource intensive by any means. Whereas traditional

master planning projects require extensive amounts of time and energy, artists on the River can offer immediate solutions by continuing their creative practices.

"the life in us is like the water in the river."

-- Henry David Thoreau, author and poet

CHAPTER **6**:

INTERLUDE: RIVER AS CIVIC SPACE

This chapter takes my underlying finding about the value of art and demonstrates the River's role as civic space in Los Angeles. It briefly reviews early concepts and attempts for civic space in Los Angeles and compares it to other places, such as Reyner Banham's notion of the Mojave Desert. It emphasizes Los Angeles' current lack of civic space and encourages urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers to understand the River as Los Angeles' civic space.

The quest for civic space in Los Angeles has always been of popular interest. It has consistently perplexed people, for in such a large metropolis, civic space must exist - somewhere. People were already familiar of early booster attempts to create civic space through Olvera Street, which romanticized notions of early Spanish living in El Pueblo; the outgrowth of Southern California's theme parks; and the beach. Then Los Angeles changed. Inevitably, the city forgot about the importance of civic space as it suburbanized.

For most of the 20th century, the carefree Southern California lifestyle was taken for granted. The city's social demographics were largely homogenous – everyone was White and upper middle class, much of which accounted for Los Angeles' growing post-Midwestern émigré society. Everyone owned a car, the freeway system was new and novel, and it was easy to be mobile. In the 1970s, Reyner Banham took a hard look at the region and along with other elements of Southern California's landscape, reminded us that the freeway and the beach were still in fact Los Angeles' civic space. In *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*, Norman Klein revisits Los Angeles' auto-centric obsession and largely credits it for the city's lack of civic space. According to Klein:

"The freeway network was finished essentially by the mid sixties, and ran at a high efficiency for about ten years. Architecturally speaking, it completed a process whereby the point that one entered public spaces was narrowed considerably, while the privacy within the auto was enhanced. This fits into a broader, long-standing policy from the twenties on. Instead of Griffith Park, Elysian Park, or the lush bamboo in Pershing Square, more of the landscape was privatized: fewer new parks and more backyards; eventually a transition to the shopping mall, to the theme park (not to mention the fantasy architecture so common to L.A.). Of course, as early as 1905, the city was already refusing offers for donations of park land, as if this seemed beside the point" (83-4).

Contemporary Los Angeles is a completely different place. While Banham's notion of Los Angeles once invited nostalgia, it is no longer an applicable characterization of the city. These days his ideas about the Mojave Desert as a forgiving and open landscape are much more applicable, especially when considering the Los Angeles River. In fact, the River and the Mojave have more parallels than anyone might immediately see.

Reyner Banham's Mojave Desert

In "Man and the Mojave," a Reyner Banham essay in his 1989 book *Scenes in America Deserta*, Banham eloquently extolled the value of the Mojave Desert as the "big backyard playground of Southern California" – a highly externalized and diffuse civic space. To Banham, the Mojave Desert was a successful space because people used and interpreted it in special ways. While his laissez-faire attitude was not the typical approach to the management of such a large and wild space, Banham recognized the tension between the activities occurring in the desert and the regulatory realities

that prevented them. He asked, "Does the Mojave, as a desert of definition, define anything more than a set of human attitudes to a particular piece of territory that we have agreed (or not *disagreed*) to call *deserta*, abandoned?" ("Scenes in America Deserta" 206). Because the River shares many similarities with Mojave as a free and open space, a similar question could be posed of the Los Angeles River.

What is the Los Angeles River?

Popular belief widely perpetuates the image of the River as a "waste space." In fact, few would argue against any statements that define the River as anything more than a space that is difficult to access, out of the way, isolated by infrastructure, lacking in formal design interventions, hostile (specifically with gang activity), dirty, and abandoned. Whereas these stark images have provided enough deterrents for the general population, they have dually served as attractors and inspiration for artists. For them, the River was beautiful and magnificent, sentiments expressed through the running narratives featured in this thesis. This connection to the River space explains why it has been such a large draw and creative venue for a multitude of projects over the last 25 years. "It was so ugly that I knew just on the theory of the Ying and Yang it was going to change," said Lewis MacAdams. "I mean out of darkness comes light" (qtd. in Lorenzen).

Artists Gathering in the River Space

Artists congregate by the River space because it is largely undiscovered—a fact that has been both its success and drawback. Their experience in the River space is characterized by excitement and inspiration. And yet, while their projects offer deep emotional and physical value, the largest value of artists engaged with the River space is their ability to re-imagine and realize the River space as a civic space for a broader community.

Within the context of urban development and revitalization, artists are often criticized for being the impetus to gentrification. They are at once seen as urban pioneers, but later blamed for catalyzing the development of luxury housing and other upscale amenities. However, this has not been the case for artists working along the River space (and should remain as such).

Up to now, the lack of focus on real estate has allowed artists to engage with the River space in multiple ways. Not only is the River a non-traditional space which is difficult to inhabit (i.e. housing would not be feasible), it is also big, complicated, and too resistant to change. Having been ignored for so long, the River has taken to a vibrant cultural life. It has relied on artists and other users to activate the space when no one else would. Therefore, its recalcitrant nature prevents it from changing easily. Furthermore, it is too important a resource to leave at the whims and decisions of market forces. We

should look to artists to help us understand the historic importance and future potential of this key feature to serve as Los Angeles' destined civic space.

A Lack of Civic Space

During the 20th century, Los Angeles was the epitome of privatization. It was driven by a growth-oriented spatial mentality dominated by a post-World War II housing boom, agriculture, and industry. The region prioritized the automobile and private space, and Los Angeles grew into a grid of bungalows. Regional commercial districts and malls began to dot the landscape. The real estate market demanded privatized open space in the form of front yards, back yards, and sometimes swimming pools. Hyper-development was inevitable in Los Angeles' vast and available landscape. As it was easy for middle-class and upwardly mobile Angelenos to rely on their private residential spaces, often times conventional shopping centers provided the only alternative for common social gathering. Altogether, these patterns made for a civic space void in the region – a lack of parks, plazas, and other civic spaces typically found in cities. Thus the importance of civic space, from pueblo to metropolis, soon vanished in Los Angeles.

Taking advantage of its Mediterranean climate and its access to renowned coastal resources, Southern California beach culture would soon dominate the landscape. Once the beach became recreational ground, the city unofficially adopted it as its collective front yard. This posed a problem: most of Southern California was inland, including its formal center, the Los Angeles Civic Center. These interior communities did not have regular access to the beach, and given that the rest of Los Angeles never formally re-oriented itself to the beach, the beach quickly became privatized. Yet, while these spaces had the allure to attract a larger amount of foot traffic, they did not carry the unique meaning of the River.

The Evolution of Banham's Ecologies: Los Angeles and its River, Then and Now

The River space is paradoxical. Just as Banham understood the physical and cultural nuances of the Mojave Desert, the Los Angeles River may be understood in the same vein. It is not just a habitat for the homeless, an environmental restoration agenda, a canvas for graffiti, or a flood control channel. It is all of these things and more. It has earned a place in people's psyche through arts and culture. Art has been a successful, albeit un-planned, way to prove the powerful potential of arts and culture to inform the future of the River space.

In *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, a precursor to *Scenes in America Deserta*, Reyner Banham examined Los Angeles' built environment through the both traditional and popular lenses. Using the city's residential and commercial fabric, combined with its creative and industrial

ingenuity, Banham constructed “four ecologies” in order to comment on how Angelenos relate to the beach, the freeways, the flatlands, and the foothills. Obsessed with the city’s non-traditional urban form and morphology, Banham’s Los Angeles was one that fixated on automobiles and mobility, an idea that, for Banham, exemplified Los Angeles’ post-urban future. The success in his *au courant* observations about Los Angeles lied in his ability to propose order to its fragmented urban milieu. Nonetheless, like arts and culture along the River, his keen observations about Los Angeles were temporary, fueled by rapidly rising incomes, automobile ownership, and affordable home prices.

Whereas these characteristics once embodied the Southern California ideal that the region has long touted, today, 40 years after Banham’s initial “ecological” assessment on Los Angeles, the Southern California region has changed tremendously. While the region is still very much auto-centric, freeways and traffic no longer hold the romantic ties that once dominated the psyche of Angelenos. Mobility in Los Angeles is now a major problem, making once “civic” spaces like the beach even less accessible. Contemporary projects like Malibu Public Beach Safaris, led by the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, re-interpret the city by engaging with public and private space along the Southern California coast. These types of projects speak to a collective change in sentiment towards which kinds of spaces are most valuable.

Today Los Angeles is also much more pluralistic, heterogeneous, and decentralized, in part due to unsurpassed immigration patterns and demographic shifts that categorically represent Los Angeles. While Los Angeles has consistently been an immigrant magnet, a recent steep influx has reactivated downtown in several waves. The first wave came through Mexican, Central American, and other Latino immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s, many of who started small-scale businesses still located along Broadway, Main Street, and other commercial corridors in downtown Los Angeles’ Historic Core.

The next wave included people from other parts of Los Angeles and outside of it who were attracted by the waves of historic loft conversions in the late 1990s. Spanning the 1960s through the 1990s, similar projects were sterile and poorly designed corporate-driven spaces, often entirely without room for culture or a space to derive meaning. Nonetheless, civic incentives to redevelop and regenerate the area have put downtown Los Angeles back on the map. While the primary focus of these initiatives has leaned to the politicized creation of a formal “civic center,” Los Angeles can no longer rely on these conventional Anglo-directed strategies. As a result, as the clearest remaining natural piece of the historic ecology and Spanish history, the River has emerged as a space for Angelenos to re-appropriate.

Emergence of the River as a Civic Space

The River crosses through and is a part of established single-family neighborhoods, historic areas where people live and work, and prime industrial zones in the city. It is a strong physical and social force. When considering the role of the River in 21st century Los Angeles, clearly the River space is sited in an amazing and valuable location. It is surrounded by a diverse population, which, through lack of access or availability of other civic and recreational spaces, is eager to use the River space as a civic space. The only thing that is missing is the River itself.

The emergence of the Los Angeles River as a civic space can also be seen as an explicit strategy to move beyond the rational and Anglo-driven mentality that characterized its 20th century development. This era propagated a flawed single-use system based on cheap energy, labor, and new materials, as evident by the growth of the Southern California's freeway system and the over-production of single-family suburbs. Having learned from these lessons, a new civic space in Los Angeles would reposition the region, geographically and socially, to the River. At the base of this tremendous opportunity would be a Los Angeles no longer constrained by previously failed and complicated systems. The River has the potential to be the symbol of a new Los Angeles. It is the space that Los Angeles has continuously yearned for, but has never found. Now is the time.

While it is still heralded as an engineering marvel, the River is far from ridding itself of its complexities. In order to serve the needs of the new Los Angeles, the Los Angeles River needs to be released from the forces that have dominated it for decades. Artists have not only maintained the value and importance of the River, but they have also liberated and appropriated it through both fixed and ephemeral projects. They have interpreted the space in many different ways, many of which I have documented in this thesis. And while it is still illegal to access, artists continue to stay attracted to it as a center for alternative culture. Just as water is inextricably tied to Los Angeles' natural past and urban development, so to should art be a part of its civic value.

A Quest for Civic Realism

In *Civic Realism*, Peter Row reexamined the public realm and organization of civic life through European piazzas and other urban spaces, both individual and collective in nature, in order to understand their attitudes and spatial meaning. Rowe was particularly interested in looking at spaces that "belong to everyone yet no one in particular," and the social, political, and cultural factors that led to their success. For Rowe, the physical nature of a place and its aesthetic appearance were in fact larger comments about the daily lives of people in that place. He attested that "civic place making cannot occur successfully without a propitious conjunction of local opportunity, community

wherewithal, and design capability" (6). In response, Rowe proposed five important balancing tests for defining and maintaining civic space. They included:

- Collaborate with broad and varying perspectives
- Challenge established order, but express common accord
- Reflect changing aspects of society, but offer something permanent in common
- Maintain a concern for everyday life and its depiction for change and advancement of certain modes of expression
- Provide spaces for communal activities, while maintaining spaces for individuals

Although initially applied to established, grander, and more typical civic spaces, Rowe's five balancing tests for civic realism may also be applied to the case of the Los Angeles River. To these aims, Rowe saw the role of architecture and urban design as one that should be responsive to specific groups, while also addressing the general needs of a broader society. The same could be said for this thesis about artists along the Los Angeles River. Whereas they are the primary constituency on which I have focused my research, this does not mean that their needs are more exclusive or important when compared to others. In fact, artists are often called to neutralize these types of debates due to art's universal and pluralistic connections.

By being both affirmative and inclusive, it can be said that artists on the River have engaged with Rowe's tenets for civic realism by presenting ways to access and re-interpret a River without heavy regulation, all the while using their creative outlets to comment on the larger civic issues surrounding the River and Los Angeles in general. Rowe's approach to civic space also sees the value of creating public environments that reflect the everyday nature of communities, including their need to create ephemeral and fixed modes of expression, and respecting and allowing their need to advance in society. In discussing the multiple agendas posed to architecture and urban design's role in human nature, when compared to other artistic practices, Rowe claimed:

"There is an arbitrariness of signs involved in architecture and urban design that makes them less expressively specific, in many regards, than other arts. Both architecture and urban design are usually involved with multiple agendas and programmatic requirements, often deflecting attention away from highly specific expressive foci and symbolic precision. Furthermore, some conceptual contradictions require special attention. The inherent idea of a strong local urban-architectural tradition, for instance, often implies various forms of contextualism, the use of vernacular..." (220).

Sharing a similar vision for civic space, both Banham and Rowe envisioned spaces that are collective and monumental, not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally. Banham's vision of the Mojave Desert is illustrated through this decentralized nature of civic space for a highly mobile society. For Banham, the Mojave was a successful space because it offers a spatial commonality for all of Southern California. Michaelangelo Antonio expresses a similar view in his 1970s classic, *Zabrieskie*

Point. In an epic portrait of late Sixties America, two characters adopt the Mojave as a space for both social activity and for defying societal rules. They uphold their personal responsibility to interpret the ideas of engaging, sharing, and experiencing such a vast and active space. In the same vein as the Mojave, Rowe found Siena's Piazza del Campo to hold the same power, just at a smaller and more contained physical scale of civic engagement.

The Inequity of Civic Initiatives: Civic Space for Whom?

The problem in Los Angeles is that despite its pluralistic demographic shifts and influx of immigrants and low-income populations, the affluent and dominant class does not need or want civic space. They have elite suburbs or hills, gated communities, private yards, pools, access to the beach, and the mobility to travel to an abundance of nature and wilderness all within an hour. In the same way affluent Westside communities have prevented the creation of a Metro Rail system down Wilshire Boulevard (Los Angeles' unofficial main street), they have disregarded possibilities for civic space. The traditional concept of civic space is no longer applicable in these situations. It is for this reason that use of the term "civic" space resounds with a larger responsibility. At other times, through their social networks and financial strength, Los Angeles' affluent have proposed and funded civic space initiatives and other large-scale gestures, many which, if realized, continue to cater to their own.

The people who stand to benefit the most from adopting the River as Los Angeles' civic space are those who comprise the region's largest majority, but have the least power. These are typically the people living in the River's downstream flats and bottomlands along Los Angeles' Eastside. Considering the nascent existence of Los Angeles' Metro system as well as the lack of a coordinated open space system, the River would be a completely different opportunity. The challenge lies in Los Angeles having enlightened civic leadership who is willing to approach the River from a different perspective and prioritize the need for a civic space over the agendas of the city's corporate elite.

Value of a Civic River

Overall, the proposal of this civic space would not be an attempt to make Los Angeles monocentric. Los Angeles has always enjoyed the freedom of being a polycentric city. The idea behind a civic river would not be to recentralize it. Instead, the intent of a civic river would be to create a contemporary space influenced by the region's diversity, renewed interests in the urban core, links to public transportation, and increased density. Beyond its proximity to dense, urban, and multi-ethnic communities, the River's adjacency to downtown Los Angeles also affords it access to several of Los Angeles' most heavily used and traveled freeways, an inevitable gesture to Southern California's longstanding, but no longer dominant auto-dependent culture. This space would be reflective of Los

Angeles diverse needs and perspectives, thereby gaining the public support necessary to sustain its future.

The significance of the River space is specific and unparalleled – there is nothing like it in Los Angeles, or many other places for that matter. Like Los Angeles, Chicago yearned for a signature civic space. By releasing space to become the city's new civic space – Millennium Park – the city realized a great attempt to introduce social cohesion. By paying attention to its local context, a similar project, yet less grand, should happen along the River. Seeing the River as Los Angeles' new civic space would re-position it as the spine of the city, rather than as the scar it is now.

The Los Angeles River is what the region needs as a civic space. Currently the River is a prisoner of engineering. Despite the long-term aims of urban planners, urban designers, and policy makers to make the River a new civic space, the current view of the River remains single function. Everything is strictly designed. According to Los Angeles historian William Deverell:

"The River has been not cemented out of existence, it's still with us. And it's still a River. Although it is a controlled river. A heavily controlled River – by design. But it's still a feature of the landscape that cuts through not only Los Angeles history in wonderful and intricate ways, but it cuts through the entire basin. It is a thread, a ribbon, in a way that Rivers are often metaphorically discussed, through communities of just breathtaking diversity" (qtd. in "The Los Angeles River").

While the active discourse on the River acknowledges the problems of viewing of the River in this way, so do urban planners and policy makers. Nonetheless, although the River space is a very special place for artists, it is not truly a civic space in its current state. In fact, the concept of civic space in Los Angeles further highlights the River's paradoxical nature.

Contemporary Problems in Los Angeles Urban Development

In fact, two of the most difficult lessons from Los Angeles' past are predicated on the perils of privatizing civic goods. They include the development of the Los Angeles Aqueduct to drain the Owens Valley of water for the enduring pueblo and the creation, expansion, and ultimate closure of the Henry Huntington's Pacific Electric Railway in 1961, stripping Los Angeles of what was once known as the "most efficient transportation system in the world." When analyzing the Olmsted-Bartholemew plan for Los Angeles, Mike Davis surmised that the plan could have single-handedly counterbalanced Southern California's obsession with real estate with a "vigorous social democracy of beaches and playgrounds" (Davis 68). Instead, the River that originally built the city would soon fall prey to the industries that lead its continued expansion. Having witnessed these challenges many times over, Los Angeles' has yet to understand the value of a unifying system. This presents a problem in considering the implementation and realization of the River as a civic space.

Planning for a 21st Century Civic River

Geographically, politically, and socially, Los Angeles has also grown more decentralized. Revitalization efforts in downtown Los Angeles have brought a new wave of residents and urban development. Nature is now unofficially the beach, but it is not accessible to everyone, especially those living along the River's downstream corridor. In a city engulfed in a dominant east versus west divide, the Los Angeles River, a historic social, cultural, economic, and physical divider, should be re-appropriated.

The River is beyond piecemeal efforts. Running through the center of Los Angeles, it must allow for an ambitious and comprehensive physical and social program, much of which may be user-driven. Consider for a moment the upstream/downstream metaphor present in downtown Los Angeles' development patterns. Earlier and current attempts to create civic spaces (Los Angeles Civic Center Mall, Grand Avenue Project, Park 101) are centered in Bunker Hill, where none of the resources flow down to the recent Latino immigrant-driven commercial corridors of Broadway, Spring Street, and Main Street in downtown Los Angeles' Historic Core. At best, most projects stop at Fifth Street.

The same is true for the River's divided upstream and downstream corridors. While the River's upstream communities comprise many of the San Fernando Valley's wealthy, White suburbs, there remains a lower basin without the same access or mobility, one the city often forgets. As this Latino population and a myriad of other immigrant groups re-densify downtown and all communities immediately abutting the Los Angeles River and across Los Angeles, it is evident that the necessity and desire for a civic space for a broad population is critical.

As a result, in the city's original center, the Arroyo Seco Confluence elicited strong meaning among the arts and cultural projects created in the River space. It is in this area where the largest number of arts and cultural projects co-existed and interacted with the River space in the richest way. The Glendale Narrows portion of the River also served as a strong landscape for creativity. While artists have already interpreted the River space as a venue for creative projects, how can their work re-imagine broader access to the River for the rest of Los Angeles?

As it is now, the majority of arts and cultural activities occurring along the River have nothing to do with the city's current urban planning efforts. This is important to note as art activities in the River space allow us to revisit the concept of a new civic space for Los Angeles. What is civic space in the 21st century? This answer will not only break down the barriers to the Los Angeles River, but will also serve to break down the region's larger social and cultural problems. While theorists like Hajer and Reijndorp have presented a framework for how to consider non-traditional and less popular civic

spaces in the 21st century through political and philosophical meaning, Los Angeles has yet to understand and set forth internal strategies to achieve this.

In Los Angeles, there is a lack of vocabulary or precedent for true civic space. Currently the River space is interpreted as a marginal space. But in reality, the River space is the great civic space that Los Angeles has always yearned for, but never realized. It is a microcosm for the other issues facing Los Angeles. It spans the region geographically and begs to be addressed. In fact, the region has yet to embrace a more current strategy of placemaking as tool for urban discovery, adventure, self-expression, social activity, and improved design as stated in the works of Moore, Gehl, Jacobs, and Kahn.

In the absence of adopting normative and traditional planning and development spheres, Los Angeles must consider new ways to manage its nature. The River space presents this opportunity. It can, as Manuel Castells remarked about the value of good civic space, “make people ‘feel together,’ which is the beginning of sharing community.” In this vast desert metropolis, amidst empty rail yards and concrete trapezoidal walls where houses are built on stilts and freeways run through backyards, reclaiming the Los Angeles River as civic space is of paramount importance.

“Touch the water where you live or you will not know where you are.”

-- Ancient Tongva Saying

CHAPTER **7**:

CONCLUSION: POSITIVE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This chapter concludes this thesis with positive future directions. It recalls the importance of art in civic space and society, considers popular critiques and previous interpretations of civic space in the city, and reviews several of Los Angeles' existing attempts to create new civic spaces. It also offers Los Angeles an agenda for landscape urbanism through successful domestic and international projects that can help re-imagine and re-shape the Los Angeles River as civic space.

As a city that continues to be challenged by its lack of civic space, it is imperative for Los Angeles to move beyond its reliance on traditional modes of urban planning and urban design. Los Angeles must consider its public realm in a larger context, not just creating opportunities for open or green space, but rather encouraging and cultivating true civic and multivalent space – space where multiple human interactions can co-exist. While the city continues attempts to manufacture this type of space, it has yet to discover that it potentially already exists in the Los Angeles River. But before the River can be acknowledged as such, the city must reconcile, recognize, and celebrate the strong cultural and democratic ideals inherent to the River space.

IMPORTANCE OF ART IN CIVIC SPACE AND SOCIETY

Civic Space as a Research Finding

The reason why I did not begin, but rather, conclude this thesis with the role of the Los Angeles River as civic space is because it is collectively the precise undercurrent present in my research and analysis of arts and cultural activity along the River space. In retrospect, this finding illustrates why it was a valuable exercise to begin this thesis by considering the value of art projects along the River, including their degree of occurrence, varied types, and the means by which they were realized, without simply making this a thesis about public art. In a larger context, the role of art on the River frames a discussion about how civic space is formed and can be supported and developed in a place like Los Angeles, where arts and culture is a very prevalent, unique, and specific aspect of the city.

Beyond Cultural Policy

Although art is its core topic, the research presented in this thesis goes beyond proposing new cultural policies to support or finance art-based projects in the Los Angeles River. This is not to say that cultural policy is not necessary or valuable, but rather it is an over-simplified solution to dealing with the issue of civic space in Los Angeles head on. While current plans for the River's future have already gained momentum, time will tell if the multiple needs and objectives set forth in the *Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (LARRMP)* can be realized.

Instead, this thesis acknowledges that the River already serves as a new model for civic space, one built around art and culture. As a person who was both personally connected to Los Angeles-based arts activities, as well as a former urban planner working for the cultural arms of the City of Los Angeles and the County of Los Angeles, respectively, my knowledge of arts activity along the River led me to defend the task at hand.

While several planning-related efforts have supported arts activities, the support is piecemeal. Furthermore, most of the artistic projects along the River are covert, under-the-radar, and relatively unknown. As tension about the future of the River increases, art offers opportunities to consider the River in a new context.

Arts in Community

Art is an integral part of society. It is a powerful medium that offers a nurturing and safe environment in which to express ourselves. It reminds us of what we have to offer as both individuals and members of society, and shows us what we have in common. It helps us understand our history and viscerally imagine and transform our future. It reminds us of our power to innovate and how the need to create is essential to our progress and the development of humanity, and thus, our communities. Without arts and culture, we would cease to exist. We would lack a critical ingredient that compels forward thinking and lose our ability to inspire who we are and how we wish to be defined.

Art is a powerful and necessary toolset for human growth and understanding that challenges our potential and improves our lives. It provides hope in moments of uncertainty and struggle, and unifies us when nothing else will. It teaches us to share our knowledge and provides a vehicle for that transaction. Without this mechanism for creating a sense of shared experience and common purpose, we would lose opportunities for improved city-making.

Art is inherent to the evolution of our social and economic systems. We interact with the arts everyday - it affects every aspect of our daily lives. It is imbedded in the architecture of our spaces, in the language we use to communicate, the different types of food we eat, in the music we listen to, the clothing we wear, and in activities we participate in as a community. "Creativity is a natural impulse – everyone has the impulse to create, tell stories, and invent things. It is a community asset, even though it's often times repressed due to a lack of spaces to express it," stated Donna Graves, a 2010 Harvard Loeb Fellow and cultural planner at a public lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

In an address given before a concert at the Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts School in September 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama stated:

"We believe strongly that the arts aren't somehow an 'extra' part of our national life, but instead we feel that the arts are at the heart of our national life. It is through our music, our literature, our art, drama and dance that we tell the story of our past and we express our hopes for the future. Our artists challenge our assumptions in ways that many cannot and do not. They expand our understandings, and push us to view our world in new and very unexpected ways...It's through this constant exchange – this process of taking and giving, this process of borrowing and creating – that we learn from each other and we inspire each other. It is a form of diplomacy in which we can all take part..."

(Boehm "Michelle Obama tells international audience why the arts matter").

Rocco Landesman, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, shared similar sentiments at a January 2010 speech given in Washington, D.C. regarding the Mayors' Institute on City Design's 25th Anniversary Initiative "...art makes communities better: prouder, more cohesive, individuated. We know and recognize cities by their special architecture and parks and sculpture gardens and neighborhood arts fairs...Art not only moves us, it tells the world what is special about us."

Artists' Role in Creating Civic Space Along the Los Angeles River

Artists engaged with the Los Angeles River have taught us how to understand the River as civic space. A narrative that has grown out of itself, my survey of arts activities along the River represented the ubiquitous struggle associated with sustaining a unique user-created environment amidst rapid transition, a lesson which can be applied to many other marginalized groups seeking civic space in Los Angeles. Despite the pervasive derelict image often associated with the River's so-called "abandoned" landscape, artists have engaged to re-imagine the River space through a variety of external and creative mediums over a span of 25 years.

In this vein, the work of artist engaged with the River has also shown that use is more important than visual form. While the River is not the most inviting or pleasing landscape, the concept of aesthetic beauty and the way people derive it is not universal, most especially in Los Angeles, a city often chided for its lack of classical beauty. In fact, this lack of traditional beauty may present an opportunity for seeing the value of the River as it exists now, both from the perspective of artists and the River's other users.

While urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers neglected the River, artists worked collaboratively and independently to create spaces and experiences not available in traditional recreation areas and cultural facilities such as parks, public plazas, galleries, or museums. Their goal was not to replace the importance of these formal civic spaces, but rather to exert a new paradigm for urban planning and urban design where less formal and less conventional forms of creative expression can occur. While the River space's utilitarian and raw aesthetic was a major initial attraction, the subsequent success of these projects has been largely attributed to a lack of enforced formal structure, governance, design, or other authoritative mechanisms not currently present in the space.

Artists have appropriated the River space as a canvas for art, which subsequently has also served as a forum for civic dialogue. They have re-imagined the River as more than a just a derelict scar running through the center of Los Angeles. They have engaged with all aspects of the River space – concrete pylons, railroad tracks, sand islands, flood control levees, and under bridges – to set the stage or canvas for their projects. Through their resilient dedication and connection to the space, they have proved that user-generated and managed spaces were successful in fulfilling a void in creative

expression amidst decayed fabric. Their work also proposed an agenda for urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers to consider for the future of the River.

Los Angeles River: A Resilient Civic Space?

The River is resilient. It has resisted being appropriated and commodified by private interests. However, given the nature of most master planning processes, the current *Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan (LARRMP)* may challenge this. Overall, the River should be appropriated by the broadest group of people, rather than by financial or political interests. Urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers all share a grand vision for the River. While their attempts are admirable, they must think beyond traditional scales. The power and potential of the River is one that formal agencies do not fully recognize, nor is it one they can control. It is one that simply exists and is inherent to the space. Actors along the River must acknowledge this, respect it, and consider ways to sustain its power.

Civic space is currently a challenged idea due to the fact that it is illegal to be on the River (only small percentage of the River is officially open to the public). The entire length of the River is a large no-trespassing zone according to all the agencies that govern the River. Perhaps poet and River advocate Lewis MacAdams said it best when he stated “We are heading down the River for the first time.” This is not to say that previous efforts have gone without merit but rather, that for many, despite the River’s history in Los Angeles, they have yet to ever see it, no less be a part of its future.

In Search of Civic Realism and Simulacrum: Siena’s Piazza del Campo

While economic trends, demographic reports, and the increased popularity of “lifestyle centers” across Los Angeles may prove Charles Moore’s notion of paying for public life, the real issue lies in Los Angeles not realizing its alternatives. Projects like the Grand Avenue Project, Park 101, and other public/private developments are merely simulacra from world-class civic spaces, but ultimately they should not be compared to such vital and established precedents. This assessment is not anti-capitalist, but rather realistic regarding the capacity, leadership, and governance structures inherent in Los Angeles attempts to create civic spaces. The same can be said for malls. Although they are not true civic spaces, they are regarded as substitutes in absence of the real thing.

This situation calls to mind Peter Rowe’s fascination with Siena in his book, *Civic Realism*. At the core of his analysis of urban form and civic life, Rowe stated “A good place to start examining both the social and physical aspects of viable civic places is with an incontestable example that has contemporary pertinence and has stood the test of time. Arguably, among all the likely candidates, Siena and the Piazza del Campo stand out as a place where civic life, civic aspirations, and civic

responsibilities have been inscribed indelibly...." ("Civic Realism"). In Siena, the Campo is an indelible and shared community space positioned within an emblematic testament to 19th century urban design. It is the heart of Siena and the center of government, social interaction, and tourist activity.

In many ways, Siena's respect for the Piazza del Campo is both related to it as a civic space as well as its value as a work of art. The same is true in most of Latin America, where murals imbue the public and civic life of many buildings. A pertinent example is Diego Rivera's mural at the Central University City Campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Murals are also a very important aspect of vernacular Los Angeles art. This is evident in the liquor stores, churches, and private homes that lend their walls to being a canvas for this popular form of creative expression. In fact, Los Angeles' Eastside is widely known for its mural tradition, one that rivals Mexico City and even Berlin. Whether they be painted by famous artists or amateur painters, murals represent a strong civic and cultural tradition in Los Angeles and Latin America, similar to the merits of Siena's Piazza del Campo.



Siena's Piazza del Campo.
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POPULAR CRITIQUES AND PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF LOS ANGELES CIVIC SPACE

The interpretation and critique of civic space in Los Angeles has long been debated among academic circles, urban theorists, and urban planners. According to Norman Klein in *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory*:

"The political culture behind this growing denial of public space has fascinated scholars for a generation now. Studies on the subject range from Ed Soja on postmodern geographies, to Michael Sorkin on the amusement park paradigm, to Mike Davis on the militancy of the fortified privatized space, to Margaret Crawford on the reclaiming of public spaces by the marginalized poor. They describe a multi-level transformation: classes increasingly isolated physically; industry sprawling into former farm areas; the maturation into cities of what once were simply suburban bedroom communities; the panic in real-estate patterns brought on by non-white immigration; the effects of declining public services, for a city that always relied on smaller budgets per capita, and is about to undergo historic, devastating cutbacks in 1996; and, of course, the continual restructuring of the built environment in response to the automobile, which brings with it the steady loss of green space" (84).

Mike Davis painted a grim and over-regulation image of civic space, one that is controlled by the corporate elite or political authorities. Charles Moore relegated it to theme parks, assuming good civic space is one that is sanitized and over-programmed. Through his ideas about what he terms as "thirdspace," Ed Soja assessed how marginal spaces can become sites for multiple points of resistance. And in the most applicable and contemporary theories for civic space in Los Angeles, everyday urbanism and landscape urbanism offer civic directions for the River. Nonetheless, current efforts such as the Grand Avenue Project and Park 101 are reinforcing the false corporate civic center ideas that have repressed much of Los Angeles' quest for civic space. Before allowing corporate interests to afflict the city's future, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers must reconcile popular depictions with existing and critical realities of civic space in Los Angeles.

Fortress L.A.

In "Fortress L.A.," a highly representative chapter in Mike Davis' 1990 visionary rant about Los Angeles future in light of its shadowed past, Davis defined a post-liberal view of Los Angeles' civic space through security cameras and law enforcement. Davis considered Los Angeles' lack of and continued destruction of democratic space and how its systemic erasure has often been the result of segregated barrios, keeping consumption and recreation separate from the publicly subsidized downtown. He argued that Los Angeles had become a panoptic city obsessed with repressing, regulating, and policing civic space. A dystopian vision, Davis stated that in Los Angeles "...one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort" (224). For Davis, this unfortunate and ubiquitous trend in

Los Angeles created dire consequences for social relations in Los Angeles' built environment. "Today's upscale, pseudo-public spaces –sumptuary malls, office centers, culture acropolises, and so on – are full of invisible signs of warning off the underclass 'Other'" (226).

By the 1990s, Los Angeles' "dream" mentality had soured. No longer was it a city of promise, opportunity, and grandeur as Reyner Banham viewed it, but rather one willing to lead a crusade to secure the city and compromise accessible civic space in the process. Like the case of the Los Angeles River, Davis commented that in an effort to reduce contact with "untouchables," urban redevelopment has led the charge to turn vital pedestrian streets to sewers and parks to homeless encampments. A shift in the urban design of the American city, Davis wrote that "the valorized spaces of the new mega-structures and super-malls are concentrated in the center, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalized in corridors under the gaze of private space" (226). Unsurprisingly, these are also the same solutions to civic space that the city has relied upon.

"Fortress L.A." posits a pessimistic view that what we have declared to be civic space in Los Angeles is not civic space and that Los Angeles is no longer a free and democratic society of unlimited mobility. In fact, Davis argued that the city is something very different altogether. He stated:

"In Los Angeles, once-upon-a-time a demi-paradise of free beaches, luxurious parks, and 'cruising strips', genuinely democratic space is all but extinct. The Oz-like archipelago of Westside pleasure domes – a continuum of tony malls, arts centers and gourmet strips – is reciprocally dependent upon the social imprisonment of the third-world service proletariat who live in increasingly repressive ghettos and barrios. In a city of several million yearning immigrants, public amenities are radically shrinking, parks are becoming derelict and beaches more segregated, libraries and playgrounds are closing, youth congregations of ordinary kinds are banned, and the streets are becoming more desolate and dangerous."

This disinvestment in traditional civic space has led to an increase in corporate-driven urban redevelopment priorities leading to the perils of associated with forced 'urban renaissances' of inner-city neighborhoods which are doing more to create socio-economic barriers than they are to eradicate them. Davis viewed civic space in Los Angeles as privatized or extinct.

You Have to Pay for Public Life

For architect Charles Moore, place was more than an exercise in aesthetics. "Place is the projection of the image of civilization onto the environment," said Moore. It has been "one of the most continuous cultural phenomena that we share, fundamental to what it means to be human, to enact society, and to imprint the condition of being somewhere on the surface of the globe" (viii). Inspired by the ideas of Louis Khan and Jane Jacobs, Moore believed that cities should be places of

adventure and discovery, for both children and adults – a preparation for how to be civic-minded. In his essay, "Toward Making Places," Moore suggested:

"...the right to democratically determine the shape of our environment is the real freedom at stake. That issue remains, as people feel more and more disenfranchised from the complex processes that go into the shaping of the environment. Moreover, many now wonder to what extent the capitalist, globalized free market should determine (or outright destroy) the urban and natural environments, and further render places indistinguishable one from another" (xxiv).

Moore's ideas of civic space challenged Mike Davis' post-modern concept of civic space in Los Angeles. Moore argued that despite advantages of being part of a continuously developing metropolis, the public realm is highly ambiguous, and most of the time, often ignored. Whereas Davis contended that civic space in Los Angeles had been corporatized by Anglo-based interests, Moore offered an alternative view in how the world has changed and comments that civic space does exist, but it is not easily accessible. It exists in places like Disneyland where you need to drive to it and pay for it. This brand of public life is acceptable to Moore and more recently Umberto Eco, who recognize that while contrived, Disneyland's entry fee ensures "clean, efficient and predictable encounters and experiences" (Banerjee, Southworth, and Lynch 157). It was in this instance where people felt comfortable watching others, being watched, and engaging with a pre-determined and hyper-choreographed spatial sequence. For Moore, civic life existed, but it was commodified or turned into entertainment.

Thirdspace

In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Edward Soja expanded on Henri Lefebvre's and Michael Foucault's spatial concepts and introduces a "thirdspace," or spaces that are both real and imagined. For Soja, thirdspace was an "Other" space, a sprawling, radical zone created and populated by the marginalized (10). It represented the increasingly important role of space in the contemporary world and allows us to consider the role of history and social structures within these spaces. What was most important about Soja's critique of space is how the margins became spaces/sites of multiple resistance and understanding to be proudly occupied, and where new and radical communities and ideas can be developed. Although not formally addressed in Soja's key analyses of spatial representations of contemporary urban development in Los Angeles, his notion of thirdspace can be applied to the Los Angeles River "... as a space of radical openness, a context from which to build communities of resistance and renewal that cross the boundaries and double-cross the binaries of race, gender, class and all oppressively 'othering' categories" (84).

Everyday Urbanism, Revisited

As part of the Michigan Debates on Urbanism series at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Margaret Crawford debated Michael Speaks on the theory of everyday urbanism as a case for "informal, bottom-up urbanism that celebrates and builds on everyday, ordinary life and reality." For Crawford, one of the founding urban theorists on the topic, everyday urbanism is an approach to the city that is ad-hoc, egalitarian, and less driven by aesthetics or grand planning or design gestures. In contrast to large-scale planning, everyday urbanism is a reaction to established and normative urban planning and urban design approaches. Although it is a vital and applicable form of urbanism in every city, perhaps no city embodies the theory than Los Angeles.

In his preface to *Everyday Urbanism*, a published transcript on debate, Douglas Kelbaugh, former Dean of the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, presented "new office towers, sports arenas, convention centers, and shopping/entertainment complexes, as well as the conversion of warehouses to lofts and of old office buildings to hotels" as a challenge to contemporary urbanism (8). He argued against market-driven development that is uncoordinated and out of context within its environment. In exchange, he valued the vitality of daily and ordinary life. Kelbaugh stated:

"It has little pretense about the perfectability of the built environment. Nor is it about utopian form. But it is idealistic about social equity and citizen participation, especially for disadvantaged populations. It is grass-roots and populist. Everyday urbanism delights in the spontaneous and indigenous; in the ways that migrant groups, for instance, appropriate and adapt to their ad hoc conditions and marginal spaces... The city is shaped more by the forces of everyday life than by formal design and official plans. It champions vernacular architecture in vibrant ethnic neighborhoods, like the barrios of Los Angeles..." (8).

According to Rahul Mehrotra, moderator of the debate, "In Asia, and in cities of South Asia in particular, 'tidiness' is not as much of a concern as in cities in the West. Architects, urban planners, and urban designers are concerned about the organization of human activity in space, and debates on urbanism are posed in those terms" (8). Discussion generally focus on big moves, such as planning mechanisms, laws and broader infrastructure that are taken so much for granted in the West. Mehrotra's words also call to mind the concept of the Kinetic City (today's everyday urbanism), one which offered a humanizing effect in the context of cities where the public domain is dead and people do not have a civic realm to connect with each other.

The description of these sites calls to mind what J.B. Jackson called this the "third landscape" – one being built off mobility and temporal existence (the first landscape) and where people created their own spaces and settlements (the second landscape). Overall, everyday urbanism was about organic emergence of street culture and a challenge to traditional local governance of the public domain. "We don't regard everyday space as a major aesthetic problem like the new urbanists or call it Junkspace like Rem Koolhaas, but see it as a zone of possibility and potential transformation," said

Crawford (19). The same rationale could be applied to the planning, design, and policymaking associated with the future of the Los Angeles River.

Speaks challenged Crawford's definition of everyday urbanism. While he understood it presented an alternative approach to prevailing concepts of the urban condition, he believed everyday urbanism to be a commentary on the city rather than a force of transformation. He stated:

"But in reality everyday urbanism is not really even bottom-up because it is mostly, or almost entirely, bottom. It never develops any kind of comprehensive proposals that might be activated by the small-scale interventions that it launches, but is instead content to fetishize and tinker with the everyday things it finds ready made. It is anti-design and begs the question: how do you design with the banal and to what end?" (36).

In many ways, the principles of landscape urbanism can help urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers understand the how everyday urbanism can be applied to vast infrastructure and landscape systems, like the Los Angeles River.

The Principles of Landscape Urbanism

Landscape urbanism is a relatively recent concept introduced by Charles Waldheim to describe a new and emerging set of urban planning and urban design approaches which prioritizes the interaction of natural and built systems as the basis for decisions about urban form. Waldheim proposed that landscape, rather than architecture, was a more capable way of organizing the city and enhancing urban life. By acknowledging that urban landscapes are constantly evolving, landscape urbanism looks beyond built environment as the sole determinant of the city in order to use a wider and more dynamic approach to variables. "Landscape urbanism describes a disciplinary realignment currently underway in which landscape replaces architecture as a basic building block of contemporary urbanism. For many, across a range of disciplines, landscape has become both the lens through which the contemporary city is represented and the medium through which it is constructed," wrote Waldheim (11).

According to the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative, based in the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University, landscape urbanism offers urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers a new framework for how to conceptualize the planning and development process ("About Landscape Urbanism"):

- The form of urban places is not shaped by one single force but rather by interactions between economic, ecological and social systems. In exchange for a finished "master plan," landscape urbanism emphasizes the value of change over time
- Extracting the tension and opposition between natural and city spaces and recognizing that nature plays an important role in the shaping of cities, even in densely built areas, which can affect all aspects of life for its inhabitants
- A new approach to regional and metropolitan systems that prioritizes urban planning and urban design strategies which move beyond traditional approaches and re-value "transitional"

and “indeterminate” landscapes often created by complex interests related to urban sprawl or market forces.

Still in its nascent stages, many practitioners consider landscape urbanism to be a set of principles rather than a fully developed theory. Among the practitioners and academics working on landscape urbanism is James Corner, who in his essay, “Terra Fluxus,” described a renewed interest to address landscape in urban planning, urban design, and architecture. Corner offered four practical themes on which landscape urbanism is predicated: ecological and urban processes over time, the staging of horizontal surfaces, the operational or working method, and the imaginary (Waldheim 16).



Barcelona's Parc Nou de la Trinitat – a recent example of landscape urbanism.
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Ailing Infrastructure Along the River

As a result of the River's adjacent deindustrialization, there is more dormant, desolate, and overall available space to reconsider along the River. But before traditional uses are planned, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers must recognize that population density has continued to increase along the River corridor. Recent immigrants now occupy the crowded neighborhoods that once housed the workers along the River's now defunct plants. As the region continues to increase in density, the increased need for civic space in a city already severely underserved is even more pressing. Combined, these dynamic conditions present a crucial opportunity to re-imagine the River beyond the usual discourse of storm water management and flood control.

Whereas these issues are still important, urban planning, urban design, and public policy must consider vernacular traditions relative to the River space rather than perpetuate the myopic engineering that has characterized the River since the 1930s. In the face of landscape urbanism, the

River embodies the “messy” spatial qualities of informal activity, much of which has already successfully re-appropriated remnants of past uses.

Recent infrastructure attempts to reactivate the space have failed in improving the River’s downstream corridor. The Alameda Corridor project, a 20-mile freight rail expressway owned and operated by the Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority, was the region’s solution for moving goods from the Port of Los Angeles and the Port of Long Beach. It is considered one of America’s largest transportation projects built in the past 20 years. Although the line is credited with relieving congestion on the Long Beach Freeway (I-710)⁶⁶, the problem with the Alameda Corridor remains in how it was designed to move non-stop freight trains through the downstream segments of the Los Angeles River area, rather than serve it.

When the Alameda Corridor opened in 2002, Taylor Yards (rail yards), near the River’s Arroyo Seco Confluence, and the Cornfields in the Chinatown/City North districts, were abandoned. While these yards have been transformed into two new California State Parks, there still exists a large percentage of desolate and underutilized industrial infrastructure, with much of the rail right-of-way along the River being acquired by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The potential for these spaces is grand and should be investigated.

PROPOSED PRETENDERS OF LOS ANGELES CIVIC SPACE

Grand Avenue Project

A major public/private effort currently underway in Los Angeles is the Grand Avenue Project. Intended to revive downtown Los Angeles, the \$3 billion project aims to give Los Angeles a “thriving city center,” the Los Angeles version of the Paris’ Champs-Élysées and New York City’s Central Park. Led by the Grand Avenue Community, under the direction of the Los Angeles Grand Authority, the project is being built along Grand Avenue amidst the corporate office towers and government offices of Bunker Hill, from Rafael Moneo’s Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels on Temple Avenue, down to the Los Angeles’ Richard J. Riordan Central Library at Fifth Street. Other existing civic and cultural anchors along the corridor include the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Music Center/Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Colburn School of Performing Arts.

⁶⁶ During calendar year 2007, the line carried 17,824 trains carrying 4.7 million TUEs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of containers.

The project includes up to 3.6 million-square-feet of development and plans for a “pedestrian friendly” re-design of Grand Avenue⁶⁷, but its major key component is the development of a 16-acre park between the Art Deco Los Angeles City Hall to the east and the A.C. Martin-designed modernist Department of Water and Power building to the west, one which will serve as “a great new gathering place in the City.” Currently the area already contains plazas, a Court of Flags, and a largely unknown and undiscovered “Civic Mall” featuring the Arthur J. Will⁶⁸ Memorial Fountain. Despite these amenities, the existing civic spaces are sunken and hidden from plain view due in large part to the entrance of several parking garages serving government employees.



Model of the Civic Park and new Frank Gehry-designed towers, near the Walt Disney Concert Hall.
© Grand Avenue Project

Planned in phases, the Grand Avenue Project is working with the Related Companies on the development of upscale shopping stores and amenities located in an iconic 40-50-story high-rise condominiums and luxury hotel to be designed by Frank Gehry, opposite his Walt Disney Concert Hall,

⁶⁷ Plans call for expanded tree-shaded sidewalks, new street lights, benches, and wayfinding kiosks.

⁶⁸ Arthur J. Will served as the Chief Administrative Officer for the County of Los Angeles between 1951-1957. His vision and 25 years of service to the community were instrumental in the development of the Civic Center Mall.

at the corner of Second Street and Grand Avenue. While existing businesses fear an inability to compete with such a top-down government intervention, supporters argue that the project will attract enough people to boost the local economy at an estimated \$35.6 million annually in local, county, and state taxes ("Grand Avenue Project"). "The Grand Avenue Project will transform the civic and cultural districts of downtown Los Angeles into a vibrant new regional center which will showcase entertainment venues, restaurants, and retail mixed with a hotel and up to 2,600 new housing units" ("Grand Avenue Project").

A January 2005 report on the project stated that downtown Los Angeles has "lacked the energy and vitality needed for a true urban center" ("Grand Avenue Committee"). The report analyzed the physical changes necessary to improve and transform the area to potentially draw 10 million people a year. "The implementation of this plan will go a long way toward transforming downtown into the urban center it truly should be" stated the report. "This district in Los Angeles, more than any other has the potential to be the setting for a wide range of uses that can bring activity day and night and create an environment that is multi-layered and attractive to all populations and all generations" ("Grand Avenue Project"). Although the project was approved by a Joint Powers Authority made of representatives from the Los Angeles City County and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, including the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA/LA), the recent economic downturn has delayed its progress.

While the project's tagline is "Creating a Center for Los Angeles," it is important to recognize that such a space already exists in Los Angeles. Historically and in contemporary times, the Los Angeles River has served as the center of the city and the main cultural resource and anchor of Los Angeles, from the sacred cultural expressions of the region's native Tongva Indians to the 20th century Arroyo Culture established along the Arroyo Seco. Even despite its concretization in the 1930s, the River continued to be a Los Angeles' cultural corridor and connector, albeit unofficially. In almost every way, the civic energy in the River space is in direct conceptual, formal, fiscal, and aesthetic opposition to the goals of the Grand Avenue Plan.

Whereas the goals of the Grand Avenue Project's guidelines are to "establish a visionary, yet realistic approach to complete and energize the park," the Los Angeles River succeeds in being a civic space that remains incomplete (a factor that is not relevant to the River's success). The River is inherently visionary due to its unique activities and monumental draw. It is un-programmed, able to operate off no funding stream (public/private or otherwise). And while not a completely safe space, it is mostly safe due to the understood respect its users negotiate and recognize it as a space where

people go to be left alone. Similar to Reyner Banham's ideas about the Mojave Desert, the River is one space, but has room for many.

Park 101

Park 101 is the latest attempt to build civic space in downtown Los Angeles. Proposed by a coalition of urban planners, urban designers, and government agencies, the plan calls for capping a segment of the Hollywood (101) Freeway into a park that would serve the Civic Center, Chinatown, El Pueblo, and Union Station. This is not the first time a park has been proposed over the Hollywood (101) Freeway. In the mid-1990s, Nick Patsaouras, former board member of the MTA, pushed a similar proposal with little success. Bounded by Grand Avenue on the west to the Los Angeles River on the east, the majority of the plan will cover a quarter-mile trench between Grand Avenue and Alameda Street, converting over 100 acres of freeway space and surface level parking lots into green space (Vaillancourt "Dreaming of Downtown's Central Park"). According to Ryan Vaillancourt, a writer at the Los Angeles Downtown News:

"New York has Central Park. In Chicago, there's Millennium Park. San Francisco boasts Golden Gate Park and the Presidio. Then there's greater Los Angeles, and while the region has some 75 miles of coastline and beloved open spaces such as Griffith Park, the city's center lacks the kind of iconic green space that urban dwellers flock to and visitors come to associate with their stay" ("Dreaming of Downtown's Central Park").

With the support of the California Department of Transportation, Los Angeles Department of City Planning, and the Southern California Association of Governments, the plan is expected to take five years to realize. Although funding sources are currently unclear, supporters of the project hope that transportation money from recently approved Measure R will help fund the project. Other sources may come from extending the scope of the park further west, to include new, taxable development.

The plan is a by-product of the Alameda District Plan, one that the City of Los Angeles approved in 1996 to spur over one million-square-feet of new commercial and residential development on the campus of Union Center, near Gateway Plaza. Like many other similar projects, the Alameda District Plan has yet to be realized. Should it ever be, like Park 101, it will likely not provide Los Angeles' answer for civic space and will potentially be more limited in its geographic scope. Los Angeles must think bigger. Furthermore, the project comes on the heels of the Grand Avenue Project and the *LARRMP*, of which no connection is listed.

Exhuming the Los Angeles River

Opportunistic projects that declare civic space illustrate a contemporary condition in Los Angeles. These projects hold merit for contributing to the tax base, but fundamentally, they are highly politicized real estate-driven interests governed by market forces. As a result, it is difficult to accept them as Los Angeles' only solution to civic space. Nonetheless, they have helped us reconsider Los Angeles' cityscape and reinvent it once again.

The River, on the other hand, shows us the damaged, living part of the city. It is a space where artists, gang members, the homeless, and immigrant Latino families co-exist. Although this may not be the civic image city leaders wish to acknowledge, by any account, the River is a true reflection of the people of Los Angeles. The city needs to accept this. These groups continue to remain to challenge tensions and continuously remain under-represented in the larger discourse of civic space in Los Angeles.

But before planning and advocating for under-represented communities along the River, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers need to find out who they are –not for the sake of dissolving their place on the River, but to understand how to implement their existing ideas for the space. When we plan for civic spaces without considering their truest users, we actually plan for a wasteland. Considering that many already despairingly refer to the River as one, this would be counter-productive. Knowledge of the River's truest users and their activities would also ensure flexibility in the future design interventions that will affect the River space, not solely in multiple perspectives.

Furthermore, it can engage a broader audience beyond Los Angeles' dominant Eastside versus Westside discourse. Considering that the majority of the River runs north and south, envisioning the River as civic space would do a lot to connect the wealthier upstream communities with the typically low-income downstream communities. The unique space would draw wealthier White Angelenos with existing access to green space and private space as well as residents of the downstream corridor communities. The space would connect the city and provide experiences unlike any other found in Los Angeles or many other cities.

Although it is difficult to balance everyone's ideas for the River, it is clear that everyone should have an idea about its future so that use is not determined by any one user or group. In *Writings on Cities*, a book authored with Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, Henri Lefebvre wrote:

"Urban strategy resting on the science of the city needs a social support and political forces to be effective. It cannot act on its own. It cannot but depend on the presence and action of the working class, the only one able to put an end to a segregation directed essentially against it. Only this class, as a class, can decisively contribute to the reconstruction of centrality destroyed by a strategy of segregation and found again in the menacing

form of centers of decision-making. This does not mean the working class will be urban society all on its own, but that without it nothing is possible" (154).

On many accounts, corporate-driven attempts at civic space across the city have done more to prevent than invite these groups, as referenced by Mike Davis' analysis of "homeless-proof" street furniture in downtown Los Angeles' Ricardo Legoretta-designed Pershing Square, a space which was inducted to the Project for Public Space's Hall of Shame in 2005. This concern for the mobility and presence of Los Angeles' so-called "undesireables" is not new. It is present in the planning of other contemporary "civic" use and infrastructural projects, including raising concerns from affluent Westside communities about the development of a "Metro to the Sea" connecting Los Angeles' low-income communities of the Eastside, "public" parks in Pasadena which require proof of local residency for use, and beaches fronting multi-million dollar homes along the Malibu coastline where owners create false signs masking as official ones to denote "No Access" or "No Trespassing," much to the dismay of the California Coastal Commission.

Temporary Use

The concept of temporary use in the realm of urban planning is not a new one. In the United States, the term "temporary use" can be found in many municipal planning and building ordinances to describe flea markets, bazaars, and lots for seasonal events, like Christmas tree markets. In other contexts, temporary use is appropriated by the subculture of squatting, where people take over private land, an action that is both tolerated and prohibited around the world.

Temporary urbanism also offers an important juxtaposition to capitalist economies, where temporary action can be seen as a method to liberate the land without having to create a productive and next best use. "The undiscovered district, the dead end on the urban landscape, the blind spot in the public perception might all in fact be set in motion, brought to the light of day by (temporary) use," wrote Ingeborg Junge-Reyer, Berlin's Senator for Urban Development (qtd. in Overmeyer 17).

Berlin

Apart from being Los Angeles' official Sister City, Berlin shares many physical characteristics with the urban landscape of Los Angeles. It is a city traversed by a dense rail network and was also formally divided between east and west by its own concrete barrier, the Berlin Wall, until 1989. After the fall of the Wall, East Berlin gained notoriety as a destination for artistic and creative interventions. Much of this occurred in vestiges of once vital infrastructure, as evidenced by the ever-changing East

Side Gallery⁶⁹ of temporary, public, street art on the Berlin Wall. Another example of the creative potential of spaces is the Tempel Flughafen, a recently defunct airport in the city that now serves as the venue for Popkomm, one of the world's largest music festivals. Although many parts of the city still await redevelopment, Berlin presents an interesting case in urbanism in that parts of the city are classical in nature while other parts are unattended abandoned industrial spaces and remnants of infrastructure.

Seizing the opportunity to creatively activate these spaces, artists have re-appropriated them. One potential reason for this is that Berlin doesn't offer the same access to recreational escape available to Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, driving one hour in any direction affords its denizens a host of natural wonders, from the Pacific Ocean to the Mojave Desert. The same is not true for Berlin. As result of being locked within their urban space, Berliners must find ways new ways engage with the city. Unsurprisingly, the city has retaliated through temporary creative uses of civic space. According to Florian Haydn and Robert Temel, editors of *Temporary Urban Spaces: Concepts for the Use of City Spaces*:

"Unification crated a very special situation in Berlin. It became a Mecca for everyone involved in art and culture, attracting many involved in these areas as well as other who had contacts in the scene. Together they formed a huge 'critical mass' with the potential to evolve from a rather marginal scene into a vital cultural factoring affecting the city as a whole" (41).

According to Junge-Reyer:

"Berlin is a laboratory for the business of temporary use. Berlin has space. Numerous disused, un-built and un-planned spaces, some of them very large, are a physical reflection of the city's history and structural upheaval: abandoned railway tracks, wasteland in former industrial zones, vacant buildings plots in 19th century residential districts, the remains of the former no-man's land along the length of the [Berlin] Wall and the gaping sites of demolished housing estates" (qtd. in Overmeyer 17).

raumlaborberlin

raumlaborberlin is an interdisciplinary group that has taken to Berlin's conditions through temporary, creative interventions that shape the perception of architecture, urban planning, and urban design and create dialogue about public and private space in the city. Born in an era of Berlin where politicians cemented up the city, the group sought to socially, spatially, and aesthetically re-define what had been wasted in the city. Through over 70 projects, raumlaborberlin has offered the

⁶⁹ The Berlin Wall East Side Gallery is a 1.3km-long section of the wall near the center of Berlin. Approximately 106 paintings by artists from all over the world cover this memorial for freedom and make it the largest open-air gallery in the world.

municipal government of Berlin alternative strategies for urban planning and have encouraged residents to become involved in the process.

Their projects include mountain hiking in the ruins of Berlin's Palast der Republik, the former home of the East German parliament, and "The Kitchen Monument," a mobile sculptural prototype with which to construct temporary communities. When asked about her definition of civic space, Jan Liesegang, a member of raumlaborberlin commented:

"I associated public space with the openness of the market square; open space in which people trade, bargain, argue, persuade and play. In medieval times such spaces in a city came alive because the whole compact city was compressed around them. In newer cities, like Berlin, closed spaces are not that common. Neither closed spaces nor representative facades are a must for lively public places anymore. I'm fascinated by special places in the city, places that have special potential, that are atmospherically strong, that get under your skin. They don't have to be beautiful; they just have to be appealing, to call out to be used, to be observed, to be enjoyed or to be changed" (raumlaborberlin 11).

These projects illustrate the successful re-activation of "in between" spaces and how to access wastelands and transform underestimated spaces, thereby showing the full potential of a city like Berlin, Los Angeles, or many others given their existing contemporary form and infrastructure. In the specific case of Berlin, the city offers an opportunity to learn how to deal with what many cities might see as a challenge or failure.

Urban Catalyst

Another popular group working with the Berlin context is Urban Catalyst. Understanding that architecture and urban planning are increasingly unable to address new challenges in cities and landscapes, the group hosts a variety of research-based programs and activities aimed at fostering dialogue about temporary use of civic space. Their focus on residual urban areas offers alternatives for urban planners and designers. More than just a series of projects, Urban Catalyst believes that temporary uses should change the culture of planning and design. Rather than leaving development to the government and economic forces, temporary uses help everyone in the city understand.

Sometimes it is not a total takeover of a space, but rather, providing access and visibility to it. The value in these spaces is their ability to exist alongside the dominant urban activities and develop from the context and current condition rather than from prescribed goals often associated with master plans. Projects have included X Ideas, an international call for re-conceptualizing Berlin's castle area in 2005; 2003's Open Spaces, a collaboration with Studio UC-Klaus Overmeyer and Cet-0 that examined possibilities to activate open spaces in Berlin's prefabricated housing district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf; and *ZWISCHENPALASTNUTZUNG*, a concept for a temporary cultural use of the former East German parliament building in the center of Berlin in 2002.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles can also serve as a breeding ground for temporary urbanism beyond the notions of everyday urbanism. Although groups like Islands of LA, a collective that creates interventions on traffic medians to provoke dialogue about Los Angeles' lack of civic space, or Fallen Fruit, an organization that investigates urban space through the lens of fruit, Los Angeles is experiencing ideas new forms of citizenship and community by re-appropriating civic space. Yet, while the outgrowth of similar civic space interventions is noticeable, most of these projects are occurring outside of the River space.

Luis Rodriguez offered that urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should use a segment along the Eastside waterfront and allow for an unregulated zone for art making. "They would never do that though – it's too risky," said Rodriguez. "The world is moving to total regulation. There is a desire for meaningful connection in Los Angeles, but it is not about building new spaces. It is about creating a city experience. That's what should be the priority." In this instance, less coordinated action on the part of planners and policy makers may create more beneficial experiences.

According to the Department of Cultural Affairs, City of Los Angeles (DCA), which is assisting the Ad Hoc River Committee in shaping the River's public art policy, "The City has to be concerned with safety, liability, and process, but how can the City encourage artistic activity without being oppressive? DCA is exploring ways on how to do things differently, while still adhering to the same concerns." If further policy is necessary, they should be flexible about arts programming and allow for non-traditional uses like site-specific dance, street art, and other forms.

DIRECTIONS FOR DESIGN

There is no question that the Los Angeles River presents a prime opportunity to create a venerable civic space in Los Angeles that serves a critical purpose. We can no longer ignore or repress its significance any longer. The space is not a typical so-called "civic space" one would find in a downtown, park, or plaza. It is a unique form that, considering all of the arts activities occurring along the space, has generated a healthy social ecology. If artists are to be seen as the bellwethers for a new movement to reclaim the River as civic space for everyone, how might this dialogue and execution begin in Los Angeles? The following provide some initial and critical suggestions.

Los Angeles River: A Case for Landscape Urbanism

Los Angeles presents an interesting case study for landscape urbanism. Its diffuse and continued growth is not linear but rather horizontal and sprawling. Its development patterns, while holding on to traditional concepts of program and structure, often fail on account of adopting rigid

structures and urban planning and urban design strategies rather than adapting to existing systems and establishing a new place-based potential. It is also a city that defies traditional form and as a result of its lack of civic space, has defied challenges associated with the traditional city/nature duality.

Even before the principles of landscape urbanism were established in the late 1990s, one could see how the Los Angeles River is a prime example. It is one of America's most representative examples of the consequences of controlling nature without acknowledging it. The River has been resilient. It has flowed naturally, been entombed, and is now awaiting its potential rebirth. Consistently an urban flood hazard, the unprecedented extent of density and development along the River has created new conditions to understand and consider for its future. Today heavy industry is done and automotive plants and other light industrial uses, as part of the affects of challenged market forces and a global realignment of industrial production and distribution, will not return. Large acreage and many sites adjacent to the River remain underutilized and vacant.

Reassess the River

Considering the birth of new ideas, demographic shifts, and the inevitable financial crisis related to the current economic downturn, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers must reassess their current plans for the Los Angeles River. Instead of forging ahead through unforeseen circumstances, a new, international team of urban planners, urban designers, and architects should be convened to review the space and create a plan. The guidelines of this plan should outline conditions to include art and culture in a way that can provide multivalent approach in all facets of the River's future. This team can include some of the most imaginative minds associated with successful projects similar to those listed in Appendice 5.1 "Positive Future Directions." This team should be reflective of Los Angeles' diversity and provide a design trajectory strong enough to create a space germane and unique to the culture of Los Angeles, similar to those ideas proposed in *The Fifth Ecology: Los Angeles Beyond Desire* exhibition. In fact, the answer may lie in adopting facets from *The Fifth Ecology* proposal altogether.

The Fifth Ecology: Los Angeles Beyond Desire

The Fifth Ecology: Los Angeles Beyond Desire, a 2009 exhibition at g727 produced in conjunction with the Department of Architecture at the Royal University Collage of Fine Arts in Stockholm, Sweden and the Latino Urban Forum, takes on the future of the River in a wildly creative and imaginative way. Offered as addendum to Reyner Banham's classic *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, *The Fifth Ecology* created a forum to imagine the River as a space that is as green as it is urban. Produced by non-traditional group of Swedish architects, planners, artists, landscape architects,

engineers, writers and set designers, this comprehensive strategy combined architecture and urban planning with an environmental focus, social sustainability and green-technologies. Not bound by Los Angeles urban planning and urban design restrictions, the group presented a host of artistic proposals on how to transform the River into a civic space. Addressing the region's access issues, mobility patterns, demographics, economics, and industry,

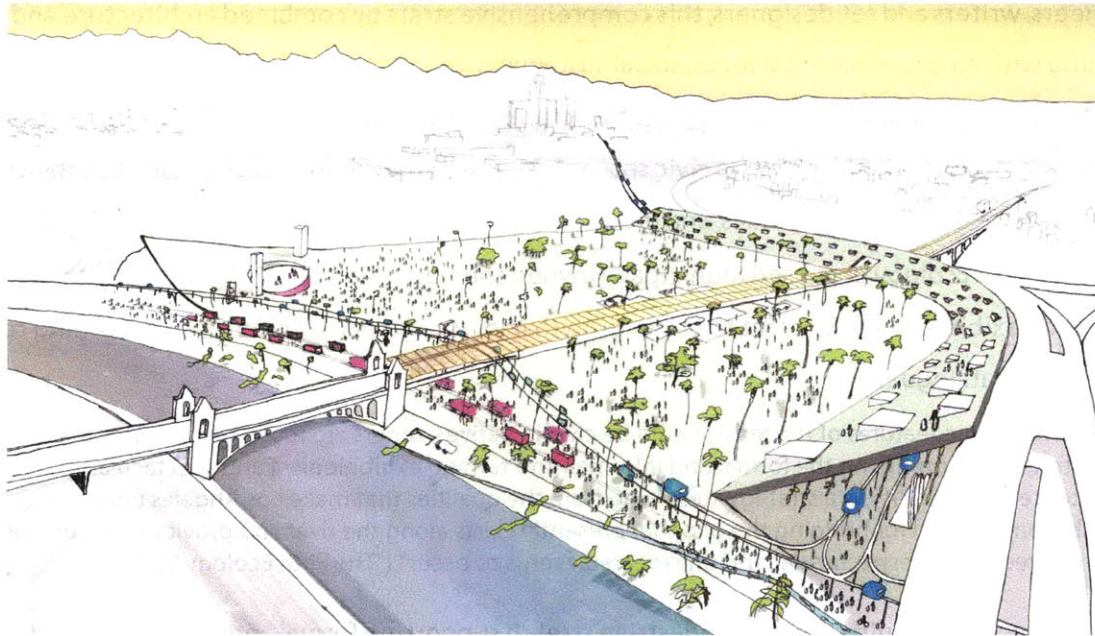
The Fifth Ecology proposed municipally owned thematic "strips" that would unite zones of the River and flexible enough to react to urban growth and its regional implications. According to the exhibition's catalogue:

"While some features of the Strip should be civic initiatives, others are more appropriate for bottom-up strategies. Combining the formal and informal, and turning exhibitionism and spectacularity into a new content for the city, is a strategy stemming from the qualities that make Los Angeles unique. The Strip becomes a tool for bridging the gap that presently exists along the river and provides a mediating ground – a free zone for spectacular and unexpected events to occur" ("The Fifth Ecology 10").

These Strips would create "a pedestrian stretch supporting formal and informal initiatives," require waterfront properties to engage with the River, and tie together various new zones, including the:

- *Athletic Highway*, a multifaceted sports facility to be located on elevated tracks;
- *Laguna Fields*, a park that reuses infrastructure to serve as a wetlands and flood protection agent;
- *Eletroduct*, a multidimensional structure that adapts to the seasonal character of the River to produce electricity;
- *Paradise City*, an 'urban paradise' located in the River's adjacent Piggyback Yard to be used for formal and informal cultural events, culinary options, an artist market and a transportation hub;
- *The Furry Hub*, an infrastructural structure linking mobility, transparent recycling, and cultural exchange adjacent to Little Tokyo and the First Street Bridge/First Street Viaduct;
- *Dog Tongue Town*, a parcel of bionic forms used to cool buildings and civic spaces;
- *The Transport Compound*, a site for transparent living and commercial exchange;
- *Agrimids*, an interconnected and agriculture-based multidimensional residential unit; and
- *Sears Palace*, a biogas facility located on the site of the historic Sears Building that would create a center for environmental urban studies as well as a "Second River" to be used for large scale water and treatment research ("The Fifth Ecology").

Whereas the exhibition and artists' proposals caught the attention of many urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers associated with the future of the River, many considered the ideas to be intangible. In a city known for its groundbreaking ideas and trendsetting nature, why couldn't the Los Angeles River turn The Fifth Ecology from a proposal to a reality?



"The Fifth Ecology's" fanciful illustration of "Paradise City" adjacent to the River, near Boyle Heights.
© g727

The promise of the River is outlined in the following passage:

"During the last century, Los Angeles has been both hated and loved as an example of urban and demographic change. The world's first motopia now has a Latino majority and is one of the earth's most multicultural regions. In the wake of the environmental and economical crisis of suburbia, Los Angeles is a dense city and grassroots movements are booming in a fight for creative urban development. Despite the city's violent and dramatic history, Los Angeles is still our capital of desire. The Fifth Ecology might be what keeps it that way" ("The Fifth Ecology").

Provide Access

Beyond realizing its 52-mile existence, the primary problem associated with people's perception of the River is knowledge on how to access and use it – a typical issue in most waterfront settings. As I have explained earlier in this thesis, the general public still considers the River to be an isolated wasteland. They do not consider it a destination, let alone a place to access. As consciousness about the River changes to include recreational opportunities, the physical state of the waterfront environment is often less important than how to access it.

This challenge conjures a mixed response due to the fact that accessing any portion of the flood control channel is still considered trespassing. While the *LARRMP* hopes to create and provide opportunities that will change this, artistic and cultural projects have been finding ways to access the River for many years. Whether through pocket parks along the Glendale Narrows, pedestrian paths along the Arroyo Seco, or former sewage drains along downtown Los Angeles' series of historic River bridges, thousands of people have discovered, enjoyed, and reconsidered the Los Angeles River and its role as a civic space in Los Angeles.

Broadening access to the River is a necessary next-step in sustaining public interest and participation in its future. If urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers ignore how people use and interact with the River, people will rebel against it. The situation will not only be counter-productive, but it will once again illustrate the immense difficulty to plan in Los Angeles.

Wayfinding

This need not require extensive financing, over-designed gestures, or time. One strategy would be to improve wayfinding for trails, official entry points, local parking options, artistic projects, and local history. "It is important for people to be able to find the River and realize how critical it is to their identity," said Lisa Marr. "It needs to be a place where Los Angeles can gather." According to Patty Lundeen:

"One of the things I think could improve the River would be better wayfinding - graphics that would show access and make it clear what was allowed and not allowed. It would also give people a visible sense of security that it was ok to interact and engage with the River's spaces. For example, knowing there was a pocket park a mile away would help people want to explore more parts of the River. There needs to be more agreement about public access. It's confusing and disorienting. There is so much infrastructure and railroads. If you are not initiated, it's daunting to even approach it, so people don't try and it remains invisible."

Usage Seminars

Another strategy could come in the form of seminars on how to use the River, including information and details how to safely and properly access the River, where this is possible, and the types of activities available for users once down in the River space. These activities would include artistic and cultural elements and would provide opportunities and reasons to attract people to the River space. This is not to prescribe a standard way of using the River, but rather enforce the elements that make it safe, clean, and welcoming. These workshops may also serve as an interactive strategy to allow mass accessibility to the River space. The result may produce new groups and generations of River-based artists and patrons.

Plan with and for the Arts

By listening to artists and other groups already fully invested in the River's future, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers can develop a guide to their agenda. Even theories like everyday urbanism and Reyner Banham's ecological views helped us understand Los Angeles in different ways. They got everything – except this. As a result, conventional wisdom has allowed Los Angeles to believe that civic space is something that has yet to be created.

But in reality, art has shown us that the River is the exact opposite. Similar to Jane Jacob's popular theories about the aspects of a great neighborhood, projects like the Grand Avenue Project

are not off base – they are, in fact, not the base. Although it existed in the plazas and early Laws of the West Indies planning principles of El Pueblo, modernism stripped Los Angeles of its civic space. As a result, civic space in Los Angeles is a different concept, one that is being redefined by art. By including informal projects (graffiti art, guerrilla street art), urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers need not be concerned with the need to program these projects but rather, recognize their existence and transformative role across the River. The value for artists would be the potential gain of a larger patron base.

For the Los Angeles River, its high concrete levee walls are already an ideal canvas representing a living, temporary, and changing urban gallery for Los Angeles. Similar to the Berlin Wall's East Side Gallery, this feature could mediate flood control and showcase Los Angeles' unique creative energy simultaneously. This project could also serve as an informal tourist destination for Los Angeles and would significantly contribute to the local tax base and economy. It would help designers rethink of how they can operate in these spaces and propose alternatives reconnecting design to human, social, and political concerns without repeating the narrow and deterministic urban design approaches executed during previous civic eras. Instead, a consideration of the value of everyday urbanism would help planners and policymakers engage with a specific type of creativity and imagination that can transform the urban experience – the one already present in the River.

The use of walls for creative interventions can be temporary and create change to engage with local communities on various levels. "The city is in a difficult place because even current mural policy has been halted [due to lack of development resulting from the economic crisis]," said Chaz Bojorquez. "Most of the policy says that any signage is illegal. You could work with graffiti artists to redefine what L.A. is all about – the entire River can be a changing, temporary canvas." This community-driven open space would open up new opportunities for practical design ideas and would ensure that art and culture be better integrated into the *LARRMP*. It would also ensure that the River not fall prey to over-design, but take its future as an opportunity to reorient its public face to the region (currently most of the buildings along the River face their backs to the River).

Art along the River is ephemeral – it is fully site-based. Therefore when artists share their views about improvements, they are not referencing improvements of their art but rather improvements to the River space. In effect, artists understand their role in helping the city design the future of the river. But because planning-related civic engagement efforts only go so far, artists, the homeless, and other under-represented groups often do not warrant a seat at the table. Their existence makes a case for bottom-up planning. "Bottom-up strategies must be used to appropriate space. Interventionist permeation, exposing oneself to experiences through self-experiment,

establishing contact to residents and setting up new connections and networks, are all experimental and processual strategies with which to approach and change places...," wrote Katja Szymczak. "The first step towards transforming and revitalising⁷⁰ a place is to appropriate space..." (raumlaborberlin 51).

While art need not dominate the River's landscape, it should play an integral role in this new plan and the future of the River. Congruous with the River's landscape, some of the art will be more publicly accessible than other projects. Given that the River has inspired a wide range of art, perhaps more of the street art should be encouraged to occur in the River's harder to reach areas – the River's frontier – spaces that artists are already activating, but would be inaccessible to the public. This would allow for the more publicly accessible places to host more traditional forms of art and allow for spaces for other non-art interventions. Sites for this would include some of the River's most active areas of activity, including the Arroyo Seco Confluence and the upper portion of the Glendale Narrows. Other popular areas, especially in reference to graffiti art, are between the Fourth Street Bridge/Fourth Street Viaduct and the Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct.

Incorporate Infrastructure

Pierre Bélanger argued that landscape at any scale should not be planned without consideration of its watershed. Comprehensively, these systems define infrastructure. He suggested that addressing infrastructural systems requires multiple and simultaneous scales of intervention: "short, immediate periods of time with large geographic effects, over long period of time" (Waldheim 91). In considering America's post-war legacy of industrial production and infrastructural decay, Belanger commented that:

"The failure to return land to productive reuse and reinvest in public works signals that conventional approaches to redevelopment and remediation have reached a tipping point. The financial magnitude and logistical complexity of the challenge facing the North American economy can no longer be resolved by singular, specialized or technocratic disciplines such as civic engineering or urban planning that once dominated 20th-century reform. How then can a different understanding of infrastructure – the collective system of public works that supports a nation's economy – jumpstart a new era of remediation and redevelopment across North America? This moment in history demands a reconsideration of the conventional, centralized, and technocratic practice of infrastructure and the discipline of civil engineering..." (Waldheim 80).

By its very existence, the Los Angeles River embodies the great myth of the American West. Assessing it through the lens of Varnelis' notion of "networked ecologies," the River and its adjacent and adjoining infrastructure present a 21st century equivalent to understanding the urban planning,

⁷⁰ Author's spelling of the term.

urban design, and development controls of the city. But unlike the region's spontaneous and discrete urbanism as celebrated by Reyner Banham's "four ecologies," Vaernelis argued that Los Angeles should be considered in reference to its networks, not independent of them. The River is a paradox. While environmental restoration advocates envision a River sans concrete, the average flow will continue to be made up of treated and untreated wastewater. As Southern California's water crisis faces harsh realities, the plan of revitalizing the River for cosmetic purposes will be severely challenged. Artists have shown us how to still find meaning in the River, despite its present physical state.

The answer does not lie in removing much of its existing infrastructure, but rather interweaving it similar to Barcelona's Parc Nus de la Trinitat or New York's High Line. The success of these civic spaces is in part due to their reuse of existing infrastructure. The River is resistant. Any review of the history and evolution of cities will reflect how new uses reform and reshape resistant forms of old activity. Uses change, but the physical forms remain as they are often impossible to completely remove. These include rivers, aqueducts, rail, train stations, airports, or warehouses.

In the case of the Los Angeles River, this also includes the concrete trapezoidal levees. Not unlike other strong infrastructural gestures in other cities, these are often impossible to remove and pose both financial constraints and new sets of environmental impacts. Through a gradual process, the Los Angeles River can still serve as Los Angeles' civic space. While not abandoned, the same was true for the Siena's Campo de Piazza as Peter Rowe has proclaimed its evolution from its previous uses to its still successful civic space.

Value "Waste Spaces"

These spaces provide people a place to "waste time" – to exist, to think, and to be alone. According to artists, the River is this type of space. To them, these spaces are often the most inspiring and thought provoking in all of the urban landscape. People go to the River because it is urban wilderness – to escape their lives and not be bothered. The River has become a space of creative anarchy, an image that holds a certain beauty and rarity amongst the River's utilitarian concrete form. From abandoned buildings to derelict waterfronts, these spaces have consistently attracted artists and creative industries. They have also served as "outsider spaces," those that are activated by Foucault's theory of heterotopia and Lynch's theory on waste spaces.

Given the normative cycle of decline and prosperity that most cities experience at least once in their existence, it is no surprise to see the extent to which decay comprises cities. While the current literature surrounding urban revitalization considers this negative aspect of cities, artists along the

River have proven the human need for people to engage in larger “waste spaces” or unclaimed, underutilized land. Instead of staying dormant, these spaces can be activated through creative projects and uses. These spaces inspire people, help them address their problems through creative outlets, and ultimately provide a venue in which to reflect and see who we are. This is also the very sign of success in place-making discourse and the design of a good civic space, as documented by Hajer, Moore, Gehl, Rowe, and Banham.

Shift Terminology

The typical terms used to refer to the River are in part responsible for perpetuating a negative image of the space. These include those set forth by the applicable and relevant literature produced by the planning and design field, as well as terms that have become a part of Los Angeles’ lexicon about the River and similar spaces. The most popular include the following terms: “waste spaces,” “marginalized,” “abject,” and “derelict.” Not only do these terms devalue signs of life or vitality produced by existing arts, culture, or other activities in the River space, but they also arrest the possibility for people to ever consider the River as anything more than a concrete flood control channel. A pervasive image, new terminology must be established to help urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers, and the general community reframe and re-imagine priorities for the River space that go beyond its contemporary, normative identity. At the very least we should call it a river.

Consider an Alternative System

Los Angeles is in need for a new and organized community interested in pushing the “River as civic space” agenda. Whereas organized existing frameworks continue to operate, these new groups must recognize the rules and systems that have created and not created civic space in the history of the city’s development. With regards to former and current planning efforts along the River, these plans serve a worthwhile function to raise awareness and offer several opportunities for public input and awareness. Through their direct allocation of government funds to the River, improvements such as new parks, paths, public art, and landscaping have occurred. However, the challenge of the plans is a scale issue. Although previous efforts have looked at the River from a regional scale, local communities prefer to identify in a smaller scale. Lisa Marr stated:

"It's crucial for the stakeholders—the artists, the ecologists, the historians, the individuals, and families who live nearby—to contribute their voices and visions toward what the River can and should be, rather than allowing politicians, corporate interests, real estate developers and industry to determine its course."

Joe Linton stated:

"The City's policy should recognize there is a rich history of art that is temporary, un-permitted, and informal in

Los Angeles. Although it's not the City's job to program or curate this, the City should allow for opportunities for this to exist because it is a valuable and tangible form of community expression. Realistically, the City and County will never support the unofficial creative engagement, but they need to realize that in a place like Los Angeles, this type of activity is important and will continue to occur. This helps keep the history of the River alive."

A Collision of Ecologies

Los Angeles is a desert. It is a sprawling metropolis, which for better or worse, is inherently low-lying, "messy," anti-monumental, and diffuse with cultural energy. It occupies a space between glitz and grit. "[Los Angeles] is a city built on many messy collisions. The confusion, delight, loathing and bliss you feel when you take the time to truly see it – that, to me, is the essence of Los Angeles" wrote Hector Tobar in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Finding the Real L.A.").

These are the same aspects of the city that excited Banham, Lynch, and others as well as the basis for contemplating new forms of urbanism. The beach shares some of these characteristics, but they are informal. Los Angeles is about mobility – those who have it and those who do not. This is widely recognized in Banham's thoughts about the beach. "There is a sense in while the beach is the only place in Los Angeles where all men are equal on common ground. There appears to be (and to a varying degree there really is) a real alternative to the tendency of life to compartmentalize in this freemasonry of the beaches...One way and another, the beach is what life is all about in Los Angeles" ("Los Angeles" 21).

Today the River represents what the beach represented for Banham in the 1970s. It is all these things and more. Photographer Tony Di Zinno, and artist who lives in the River-adjacent former brewery-turned artists colony aptly named "The Brewery," amidst rail yards and aging industrial buildings claims "The people here are longing for something. We're looking for something authentic, precious or romantic" (qtd. in Tobar "Finding the Real L.A."). While the beach is over 20 miles away, luckily for Di Zinno and any anyone else with such longings, the space already exists just beyond the railroad tracks.

Widespread Applicability

While the Los Angeles River is unique in its own right, there are spaces like this in most every city. These spaces are functionally important and once served as important systems of infrastructure for commerce, manufacturing, and the general livelihood of cities. From the abandoned automobile plants of Detroit to the grain elevators of Buffalo, New York, these spaces remind us of the forces that once built our cities, but now represent their abandonment. They present opportunities for heterogenous social formations and are in a constant state of transformation. As people produce the concept of space, it is inherently shaped by their own ideas. Unfortunately contemporary urban

development, confronted with both shrinking cities and expanding mega-regions, has yet to understand how spatial experimentation is vital to understanding the complexity of cities. These traditional attempts offer only marginal solutions. According to the members of raumlaborberlin:

“Within the context of faster changing cities and shrinkage scenarios that are increasingly difficult to steer, rigid planning procedures which develop standardized solutions from afar, such as the classical master plan, are becoming obsolete. Master plans usually have very little to do with actual reality. It is impossible to plan the identity of a city, it must develop by itself. A new type of planning is needed that motivates and provides room to absorb all that is evolving and being generated” (raumlaborberlin 51).

CONCLUSION

By way of this mandate, the River holds the potential to be a special type of civic space. We should move forward with a new agenda for the River because landscape studies have diversified. From the rise of interest in landscape urbanism to new interpretations of urban nature, urban landscapes are no longer just about the picturesque. International artist Tammo de Jongh said it best:

“The criterion of much modern design is that it ‘must be popular’ (which can often mean brash or vulgar) although no-one dares say so, either because it is politically unfashionable to do so, or in case the majority suddenly wakes up to the fact that the visual vulgarity exists (which would really upset the apple-cart). Design in landscape and other fields is so often to the lowest common denominator of taste, when what is needed is grace, nobility and simplicity” (qtd. in Brassley).

A New Frontier

The need to forge a new frontier is upon us. The future of the Los Angeles River depends on it. If executed sensitively, its future will never be like anything urban planning and urban design has ever created or witnessed. Angelenos, and the world for that matter, should expect nothing less from Los Angeles. It is a city that has never followed the rules and has always dared to be different. Why stop now? The value and intrigue that surround it are not derived from templates or best practices, despite the arsenal created by the rise of urban waterfront redevelopment projects over the last 20 years. In fact, artists engaged with the River are more than realistic about the political issues and financing associated with projects such as the *LARRMP*. By the time it is executed in its entirety, the physical and social context of Los Angeles will have drastically changed.

As stated by many of the people I interviewed, “It wouldn’t take much to improve it.” Mark Steger of Osseus Labyrinth observed, “Not much has to be done with it to make it more a part of the city. The Seine in Paris is mostly concrete.” For others, like Lisa Marr, the River presented a new form of creative urban planning:

“The River is the artery of Los Angeles, There is a vibrancy that exists when people let places like the River be what they are, embrace it, and get excited about it. Bureaucratic powers should have more faith in artists’ abilities to re-imagine urban problems, from the River and beyond.”

This has been also recognized by the United National Education, Science, and Culture Organization (UNESCO), the formal, global steward of cultural landscapes. In World Heritage paper n°26, *World Heritage Cultural Landscapes. A Handbook for Conservation and Management*, published by the World Heritage Centre, one of its strongest values is “a recognition of the non-monumental character of the heritage of cultural landscapes; the acknowledgement of the links between cultural and biological diversity, specifically with sustainable land-use” (Jones “US/ICOMOS E-News April 2010”).

In the Prologue to her classic text, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and City Design*, Anne Whiston Spirn wrote “The city is a granite garden, composed of many smaller gardens, set in a garden world. Parts of the granite garden are cultivated intensively, but the greater part is unrecognized and neglected” (Spirn 4). The same could be said about the Los Angeles River. The space is a pioneer, one which artists recognized early on. However, as the largest space in the city, reckless actions may lead to its over-commodification, as seen in many of Los Angeles’ earlier attempts at civic space. Similar to the ideas of Hager and Gehl, a good civic space that does not rely on exaggerated design efforts will get people to come if it is allowed to be what it is.

Not only does Los Angeles lack adequate civic space, but its largest gaps are in the city’s poorest communities, which are also communities of color. The problem exists and reductivist solutions are manifold. But the momentum lost in the economic realities and political will address is slow. In fact, in lieu of building new spaces, the challenge to maintain the city’s existing, though limited, park system creates a much dire issue. Unsurprisingly, reductions in facilities, maintenance, and programming are affecting the city’s neediest communities along the River’s downstream segment. Instead of proposing any more grand plans, Los Angeles should take a deep look to see what is already working in the city. The Los Angeles River provides this opportunity.

The Challenge Ahead

The challenge does not lie in a complete redesign of the Los Angeles River. In fact, the solution is much simpler. While not the only interest group along the River, the observations gathered from my over 50 interviews with artists provide useful and applicable insight for the future of the River. As noted in my analysis of artists’ engagement with the River, the majority found the River to be relatively successful as a civic space in its current state. Given that the River is functioning well on many levels (civic engagement, social expression), artists state that urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should invest their energy and financial capacity in small-scale and cost-effective

short-term solutions such as improved access, wayfinding, parking, and the addition of basic civic amenities.

If the River was not a successful civic space, people would not be there at all. But the challenge of this thesis remains how can the River become something more than just a space that is an illegal, locked-off zone and allow itself to serve as Los Angeles' civic space without falling prey to corporatized interests and tenuous regional and political unity? Unfortunately Los Angeles has grown accustomed to ill-conceived master planning efforts, especially those focused on creating civic space. A practical solution is in order. Katja Szymczak, a member of Berlin's temporary artist collective, raumlaborberlin, stated:

"Architecture and urban planning always tell a story; the story of public space... While public space was considered static and materialistic as Modernism began, since the last decade our perception of it as transitive and permanently subject to modification is growing... Public space and the way it is perceived must be composed and appropriated must be encouraged. Projects and participants should become part of the history of a place" (raumlaborberlin 135).

Perhaps the lessons learned from currents in urban planning, urban design, and urban development in other cities with analogous infrastructure, both domestic and international, should be the guiding force in supporting Los Angeles' recognition of the Los Angeles River as civic space. These observations should set a larger agenda for the future of the River as well as other major urban development projects in Los Angeles, and should be large enough to complete with established, normative paradigms.

Reflecting on Research

I began my research for this thesis with an interest and intrigue in arts activities occurring along the River. Relying on knowledge gained from my previous professional connections or direct involvement with these projects, I inventoried a host of arts projects and their relationship with the River space.

This thesis reflects my process of discovery. Beginning with my strong personal connection, my investigation into the activities I was already aware of led me to a considerable, but not surprisingly, number of projects (almost three times the size of my original list). By acknowledging this proliferation of arts projects along the River, I came to realize the River as a microcosm of Los Angeles. Artists' work reflected meaningful connections to place, history, and culture. While these were creative efforts, they simultaneously (and sometimes inadvertently) shaped the public realm.

From the perspective of urban semiotics, this is a likely message, one that I have interpreted in this thesis. While support and financing for artists is still an issue critical importance, the basis of this

thesis drew upon the importance of arts engagement along the River. Artists are telling us that the city does not provide enough venues for creative expression, whether by will or by a lack of capacity, but needs to. They maintained that art and culture provided a basis for community and can interpret it in various ways, especially during challenging times like the present.

They also framed culture in an extensive way, much more than my research was capable of covering in the period of time allocated to write this thesis. Beyond traditional and contemporary art forms, artists have also interpreted culture through mere familial and group social gatherings, faith systems, food, and other sub-cultures including bicycle communities and guerrilla gardening.

After reviewing over 40 artistic and cultural projects, it was evident that the space benefitted tremendously from a lack of design and a lack of rule and regulation. In fact, many artists used my interview with them as an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of their work, and those who came before them. And while many of these projects were created as conduits to raise consciousness about the River, engage with local communities, and catalyze adjacent improvements, other projects were personal in nature. Overall, they responded to their concern for the River's potential over-commodification, as well as a general lack of civic space and venues for creative expression in Los Angeles, illustrating how the concretization of the River was not just a physical, but also a cultural problem.

While the research in this thesis has shown that artists have the potential to contribute powerful ideas and alternative models for urban planning and urban design along the Los Angeles River, the city's pervasive planning paradigms make it difficult to realize. The propensity for these activities reflects an unavoidable need for planners and policy makers to recognize the value of art and culture amidst the River's planned future revitalization efforts. Having operated in the River space for over 25 years, the knowledge, personal connections, and intentions of the River's artists prominently position them to re-imagine the space in multiple levels and non-traditional degrees. Artists can change the perception of the urban environment. They can be catalysts to inspire the traditional paradigms of master planning efforts.

Final Thoughts

The Los Angeles River is civic space in its truest form. It was not created for the affluent, elite, or by for-profit interests. In fact, it collects no financial gains. In its current form, it was generated by people and communities because society craves this space. By their re-appropriation of the space, it has become civic. While its use is dominated by under-represented social and cultural sub-groups, the future of the Los Angeles River should become an example for how finally good things can happen to the disenfranchised and disempowered people of the River's downstream communities right from the

start. Moreover, if executed properly, the future of the River could show that these bottomlands are not a wasteland by any means, but thriving centers of vital cultural expression.

One of the values of civic uses is that when it is the right thing to do, people will be involved. This energy creates a strong social force. In Los Angeles people want civic space so badly that they would build it themselves rather wait for long-term efforts to materialize. This was the impetus for why artists initially engaged with the River. Without access or adequate venues for which to express themselves, they re-appropriated the River as their new cultural canvas. Despite its lack of traditional aesthetic-based nature, art, and culture, the space successfully functions as a living, breathing cultural ecology.

When it comes to arts and culture, cities need to take a more proactive and deliberate approach that supports, rather than merely appreciate, these activities. The successful gains and outcomes of these types of projects along the River is a lesson in how marginalized and overlooked groups often hold great power to inform planning and policy agendas in urban revitalization movements, such as the future of the Los Angeles River. As Temel wrote, the temporary urbanism occurring in Berlin reminds us that:

"...communes neither have the financial means nor the political power to plan entire neighbourhoods themselves...master plans whose implementation dates are set far in the future because of legal proceedings and court battles open up a window of opportunity for temporary uses of their sites. When it is possible to produce long-term effects by means of such projects – for example, improving cultural capital by adding cultural projects – then they are more than just provisional. This is especially critically to realize as cities wager on cultural policies to improve their chances of local competition in a fight for the so-called "creative class" (41).

While the goal of artistic projects along the River is not collective action, it is critical that both independent and collaborative artistic and cultural projects maintain their energy amidst larger-scale commercial and privately-funded cultural options, such as the Hollywood film industry. When compared to these general projects, place-based and site-specific activities illustrate the value of their grassroots, organic, ad-hoc, and unique nature.

To Deny the River

To deny the river is to deny the origin of the city. To re-imagine the river is to discover a unique opportunity to define civic space, join neighborhoods and communities together, and reconnect to landscape, culture, and history. Looking at the River takes us back deep into urban history and how urban spaces in cities evolved. They evolved from civic spaces – parks, plazas, squares, commons, and piazzas – where people gathered to express themselves socially, culturally, spiritually, or politically. Applying this important element of urban history to contemporary Los Angeles is not only a positive action, but also a model for how the past can be the portent of a better future. It says

that we are still the same people, but our cities are much bigger and more complex – and yet they are the same too.

Urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers in Los Angeles should be enlightened enough to recognize the River in its true form as the space that it is, rather than impose a new concept, and begin using design to open the River and provide access. Through this action, the future of the River will never be like anything Los Angeles or the world has ever seen, a logical expectation from a city known for its innovation and rule-breaking creative agendas. The River's future is surely not one that will be derived from a template or a best practice. This is my charge to Los Angeles. By daring to be different, especially in the domestic United States context, the River holds a special and unique power to serve as Los Angeles' civic space to the broadest possible audience.

In a sense, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers should improvise and help sustain people's healthy, existing actions in cities, whether it is through art or other means. Traditional paradigms often fall victim to highly politicized or privatized, corporate interests. But if urban planning and urban design was truly interested in approaching cities through a pragmatic and equitable approach, then the city would see how the answer to Los Angeles' civic space lies in the Los Angeles River. According to Lewis MacAdams, "The River beckons as an outlaw place - it will remain that way for a while and I'm glad for that. Most of the great artistic work is done without permissions. It's one of the most valuable aspects of the River. The best vision for its future is to remain a radical place."

Realizing the Los Angeles River as the city's civic space will be the product of continuous compromise and negotiation. Nevertheless, as proven by the successful observations Jane Jacobs conducted about urban renewal in American cities in the 1960s, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers need to learn from what the city is saying and how people are using civic spaces in their existing form. Put simply, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers need to start "listening to the city." Deep in the Los Angeles River, beyond the railroad tracks and debris, artists have taught us that there is a great benefit to learn about the culture in concrete.



The author, on the Los Angeles River – January 2010.

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APPENDIX

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APPENDICE 1.1 Methodology | Extended Methodology

My qualitative analysis is derived from interview questions to artists, urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers about their engagement with the Los Angeles River and its role as a venue for artistic expression. I was curious about logistical and historical details including: What prompted these actors to engage with the River over other civic spaces in Los Angeles? Why now? What challenges or obstacles have these projects encountered when engaging with the River or its public stewards? I was also interested in the extent of the knowledge and subsequent reactions users had for the River's large- revitalization plans, personal or organizational involvement with public meetings and input, and alternatives, if any, to revitalization.

The interviews were aimed at acquiring a more nuanced, deeper understanding of the outgrowth of artistic interventions along the River and how these projects possess a larger value for social engagement. These interviews were critical in that very little has been written about specific artistic engagement with the Los Angeles River. Although there has been an increase in the amount of literature related to cultural planning, the "creative class," or the economic impact of the arts in urban development and revitalization, sparse literature exists on the value of artistic interventions in abandoned public spaces. This may be in part due to the fact that the perception of arts within the city has grown so formalized that public agencies are reluctant or unprepared to adopt or support informal and organic creative practices.

Upon reviewing all cases, I analyzed trends, patterns, and lessons learned by each in order to understand their motivations and implications. These themes included Performance (projects that dealt with movement, dance to music), Visual (including graffiti art, photography, and other forms of visual art), and New Media Arts (projects using new media, exhibitions, and other forms of re-imagining the River). I also did a two-fold analysis of the spatial relationships each project had with the River. I first assessed how many projects occurred on the River versus those that have occurred outside of the River, but were fundamentally inspired by the River space? I followed this assessment with a focused look on which nodes each project was occurring within my downstream corridor project scope, including the Glendale Narrows, Arroyo Seco, and downtown Los Angeles industrial channel. What type of artistic activity was occurring where? Was there a causal or corollary relationship with a type of project and a specific node on the River?

All interviewees were self-selected and found through five different methods: personal contacts with potential interviews I had met through my previous cultural planning work and artistic patronage in Los Angeles, contacts obtained by River advocates at not-for-profit organizations, contacts obtained by public officials, urban planners, urban designers, and policy-makers within the City of Los Angeles and County of Los Angeles, internet keyword searches for artistic projects along the Los Angeles River, recommendations from university or college-based creative projects along the River, and referrals and contacts obtained by the four prior methods.

Given the range of situations and environments where I was conducting my interviews, I determined the appropriate recording method upon beginning my interview on a case-by-case basis, both to respect any privacy concerns as well as my own safety. I relied on these initial interviews to fill gaps and add to my growing list of both formal and informal forms of artistic production and cultural activity.

APPENDICE 1.2 Methodology | Interview List

First Name	Last Name	Organization	Project	Title/Role
Oscar	Amaro	City of Los Angeles, Department of Sanitation, Bureau of Public Works, Watershed Protection Unit	LARRMP (2007) Official Poster	Graphics Supervisor
Carol	Armstrong	City of Los Angeles, Bureau of Engineering.	LARRMP (2007)	Project Manager
Katie	Bachler	Llano del Rio Collective	A Map for Another LA	Artist
Shelly	Backlar	Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR)	Various	Executive Director
Orameh	Bagheri	LA Yellow Box	LA Yellow Box	Artist
Chaz	Bajorquez		<i>Ulysses Guide to Los Angeles River, Vol. 1</i>	Visual Artist
Chris	Brand	<i>Ulysses Guide to Los Angeles River, Vol. 1</i>	Pasadena Museum of California Art exhibition	Artist
Tim	Brick	Occidental College Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI)	Arroyo Fest and 2002 Year of River Arts	Executive Director
Ailcia	Brown	Historic Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council		Community Leader
Steve	Callis		Various photography	Photographer
Dyanne	Cano	Oakwood School	Del Rio Exhibition (g727) and Documentary	Director of Community Service
Bamboo	Charlie	Homeless man near the 6th Street Bridge	Found art project	Artist
Suellen	Cheng	El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument/Chinese American Museum	LARRMP (2007) Committee	Curator II
Sara	Daleiden	L.A. Urban Rangers/S(O)UL	Downtown L.A. Tour (upcoming)	Artist/Cultural Producer
Juan	Devis	KCET (New Media Department)	Departures: L.A. River	
Heidi	Duckler	Collage Dance Ensemble	Mother Ditch	Artistic Director
Felicia	Filer	City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs (Public Art Division)	Public art policy for City of Los Angeles Ad Hoc River Committee	Director
Brett	Goldstone	Visual and Performance Artists	River Gates (Great Heron and Water with Rocks)	Artist
Anne-Marie	Gregg	USC Public Art Studies Department	Thesis on Temporary Visual Projects along the L.A. River	Graduate Student
Ken	Haber	Urban Photo Adventures	Unexposed: The L.A. River Tour	Director
Julie	Herbert	Cornerstone Theater	Touch the Water: A River Play	Writer

First Name	Last Name	Organization	Project	Title/Role
Robby	Herbst	Llano del Rio Collective	A Map for Another LA	Artist
Heather	Hogan	Arroyo Arts Collective	River Visions and River Alchemy exhibitions	Artist
Judith	Hopkins	Take the Reins	Stable and horse training camp with creative writing and photography	Executive Director
Mark	Indig	Urban Photo Adventures	Unexposed: The L.A. River Tour	Director
Bill	Johnson	Photographer	River Bridges	Landscape Photographer
Pauline	Kamiyama	City of Los Angeles, Department of Cultural Affairs (Public Art Division)	Public art policy for Ad Hoc River Committee	Public Art Specialist
Ari	Kletzky	Islands of LA	Islands and Streams Project	Director
Sojin	Kim	Curator	Upcoming exhibition on nature and people's connection with it	Natural History Museum
Stephan	Koplowitz	Stephan Koplowitz: TaskForce Dance	Liquid Landscapes	Dancer and Choreographer
Victoria	Kruas	LA Eastside Blog	Eastside Luv Poetry Festival (East vs. West "of the River")	Blogger
Mia	Lehrer	Architect and Designer	LARRMP (2007), LA River Studio at Harvard GSD (2002), Supernatural Urbanism: LA River Studio (2003)	Consultant Team Member
Leo	Limón	Visual Artist	River CATz	Artist
Joe	Linton	L.A. Creek Freak Blog + CICLE	Down by the LA River Guide Book	Artist/Advocate/Cyclist
Lewis	MacAdams	FoLAR	The River: Books One, Two and Three	Poet and Advocate
Lisa	Marr	Echo Park Film Center	This is the LA River (mini-documentary)	Operations Manager
Alex	Ontero		Reflections on Meeting of Styles (2007)	Homeless man near the confluence
Dana	Plays	Occidental College	River Madness (2000)	Filmmaker
Alex	Poli (ManOne)	Crewest / Meeting of Styles 2007	Meeting of Styles (2007)	Graffiti Artist
Nicole	Possert	The Arroyo Guild	LARRMP (2007) Committee	Advocate/Letterpress Artist/Cultural Consultant
Jennifer	Price	FoLAR and L.A. Urban Rangers	L.A. River Tours for FoLAR and L.A. Urban Ranger Tours	Writer, River Tour Guide, and L.A. Urban Ranger
Councilman Ed	Reyes	City of Los Angeles, Council District 1	LARRMP (2007)	Councilman, District 1
Andrea	Richards		Taking the Reins (stable camp for girls)	Writer/Writing Instructor
Luis	Rodriguez	Tia Chucha's Café Cultural	The Concrete River (poetry anthology)	Writer, Poet, Advocate

First Name	Last Name	Organization	Project	Title/Role
James	Rojas	g727, FoLAR, METRO	The Fifth Ecology: Los Angeles Beyond Desire and 5 Models Afloat Model Building Workshops	Curator, Transportation Planner/FoLAR Board Member/Artist
Jeremy	Rosenberg	KCET and <i>L.A. Times</i>	<i>Think Tank</i> Blog (KCET)	Writer and Blogger
Sharon	Sekhon	Studio for Southern California History	L.A. River Bridges 2010 Calendar	Executive Director
Suzanne	Siegel	Arroyo Arts Collective	River Visions and River Alchemy exhibitions and River Bench at Taylor Yards	Artist
Evan	Skrederstu	Ulysses Guide to LA River, Volume 1	Pasadena Museum of California Art exhibition	Artist
Mark	Steger	Osseus Labyrinth	51 Miles of Concrete and performance of THEM	1/2 of Osseus Labyrinth
Lupe	Vela	City of Los Angeles, Ad Hoc River Committee	<i>LARRMP</i> (2007)	Policy Director
Fabian	Wagmeister	UCLA REMAP	Juncture	Associate Professor and Digital Media Artist
Tricia	Ward	ArtsCorpsLA	Tierra de la Culebra Art Park	Founding Executive Director
George	Wolf	Surviving LA	Kayaking down the L.A. River	Kayaker

APPENDICE 1.3 Methodology | Interview Questions (Artists)

PROJECT BACKGROUND

- 1) How would you describe the Los Angeles River? What does the River mean to you?
- 2) In what capacity are you/is your organization involved with the River?
 - Specific role/project
 - History/Length of time
- 3) What inspired you/your organization to engage with the River?
- 4) Is your work site-specific or occurring in various parts of the River?
- 5) Who is your audience? Has this changed over time?
- 6) Do you have a specific intention/goal with your art along the River?

RIVER ACTIVITY (CURRENT & FUTURE)

- 7) What type of activity do you see along the River?
- 8) Do you notice there is a difference in the types of activities that happen along the River as compared to other spaces in Los Angeles (i.e. are any of these activities River-specific)?
- 9) How do you see the River as a space for art?
- 10) Do you notice any patterns within the art and cultural activities along the River?
- 11) Are there any obstacles that would currently/in the future prevent you from producing art along the River, especially in the way of urban design or public policy?
- 12) Through their support/involvement with your project, do you notice a change in how your audience/participants now interpret/engage with the River (i.e. more involved)?

PLANNING/FUTURE

- 13) Do you have a relationship with local government or nonprofit advocacy groups? If so, how would you describe it?
- 14) Are you familiar/involved with the current formal River planning efforts?
- 15) How might you describe the current plans for the River's future?
- 16) What would it take to get you and more artists involved in the current River planning efforts?
- 17) Do you see the River as a space where both formal and informal arts projects can co-exist?
- 18) What types of art do you envision?
- 19) Do you see your work as part of planning or "re-imagination" of the River?
- 20) How would you re-imagine the Los Angeles River? (What is your vision for change along the River)?

APPENDICE 1.4 Methodology | Interview Questions (Urban Planners/Urban Designers/Policymakers/Advocates)

PROJECT BACKGROUND

- 1) How would you describe the Los Angeles River?/What does the River mean to you?
- 2) In what capacity is your organization/agency involved with the River?
 - Specific role/project
 - History/Length of time
- 3) What inspired you/your organization to engage with the River?
- 4) Is your work site-specific or occurring in various parts of the River?
- 5) Who is your audience? Has this changed over time?
- 6) Do you have a specific intention/goal with your planning/advocacy efforts along the River?

RIVER ACTIVITY (CURRENT & FUTURE)

- 7) What type of activity do you see along the River?
- 8) Do you notice there is a difference in the types of activities that happen along the River as compared to other spaces in Los Angeles (i.e. are any of these activities River-specific)?
- 9) Do you see a role/place for art along the River? If so, what types of projects do you envision?
- 10) Are there any obstacles that would currently/in the future prevent you from producing art and cultural activities along the River, especially in the way of urban design or public policy?
- 11) Through their support/involvement with your project, do you notice a change in how your audience/participants now interpret/engage with the River (i.e. more involved)? How you interpret/engage with the River?

PLANNING/FUTURE

- 12) What is your relationship with artists along the River?
- 13) How might you describe the current plans for the River's future?
- 14) What would it take to get more cultural producers involved in the current River planning efforts?
- 15) Do you see the River as a space where both formal and informal cultural projects can co-exist?
- 16) How would you re-imagine the Los Angeles River? (What is your vision for change along the River)?

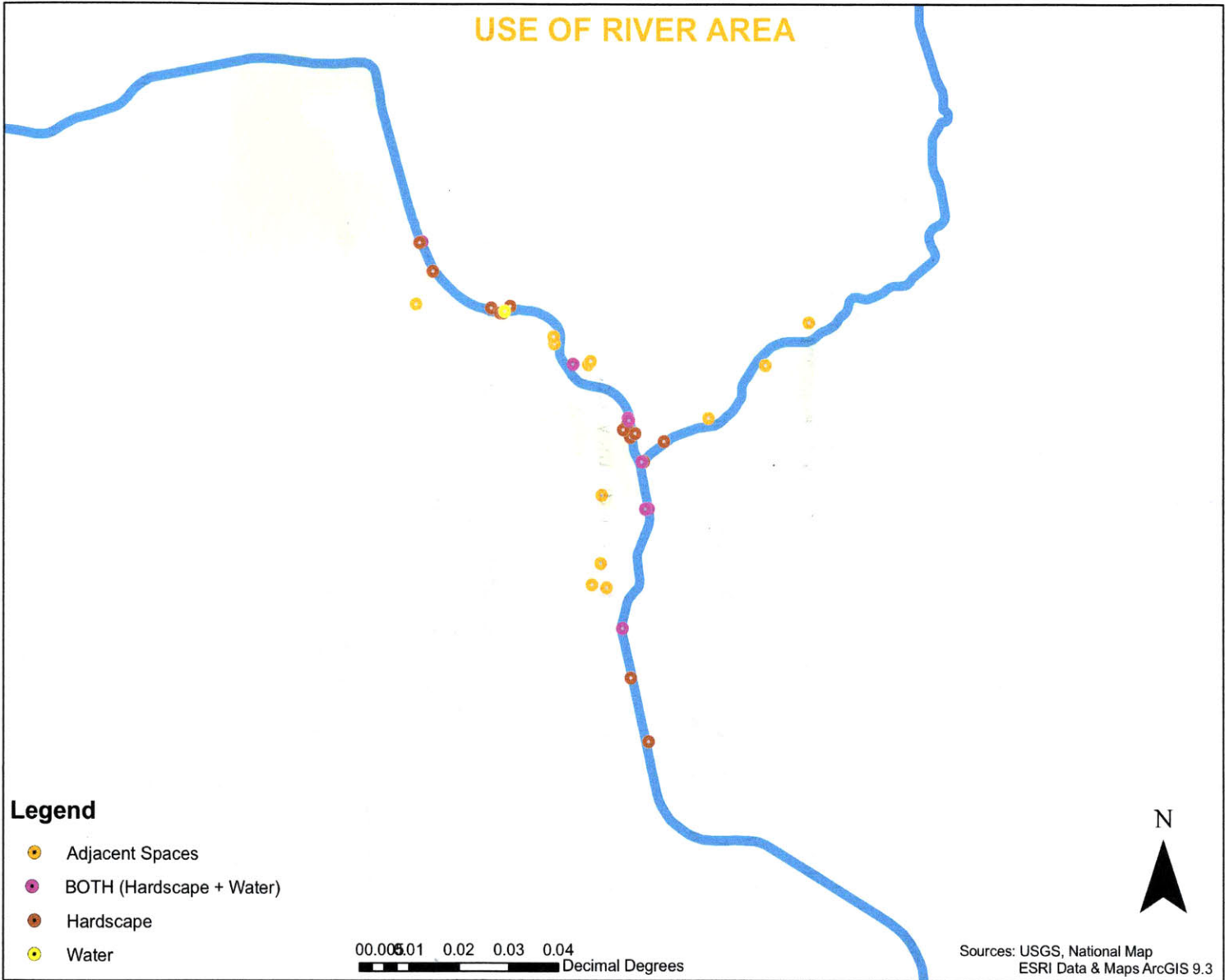
APPENDICE 1.5A Methodology | GIS – Overview

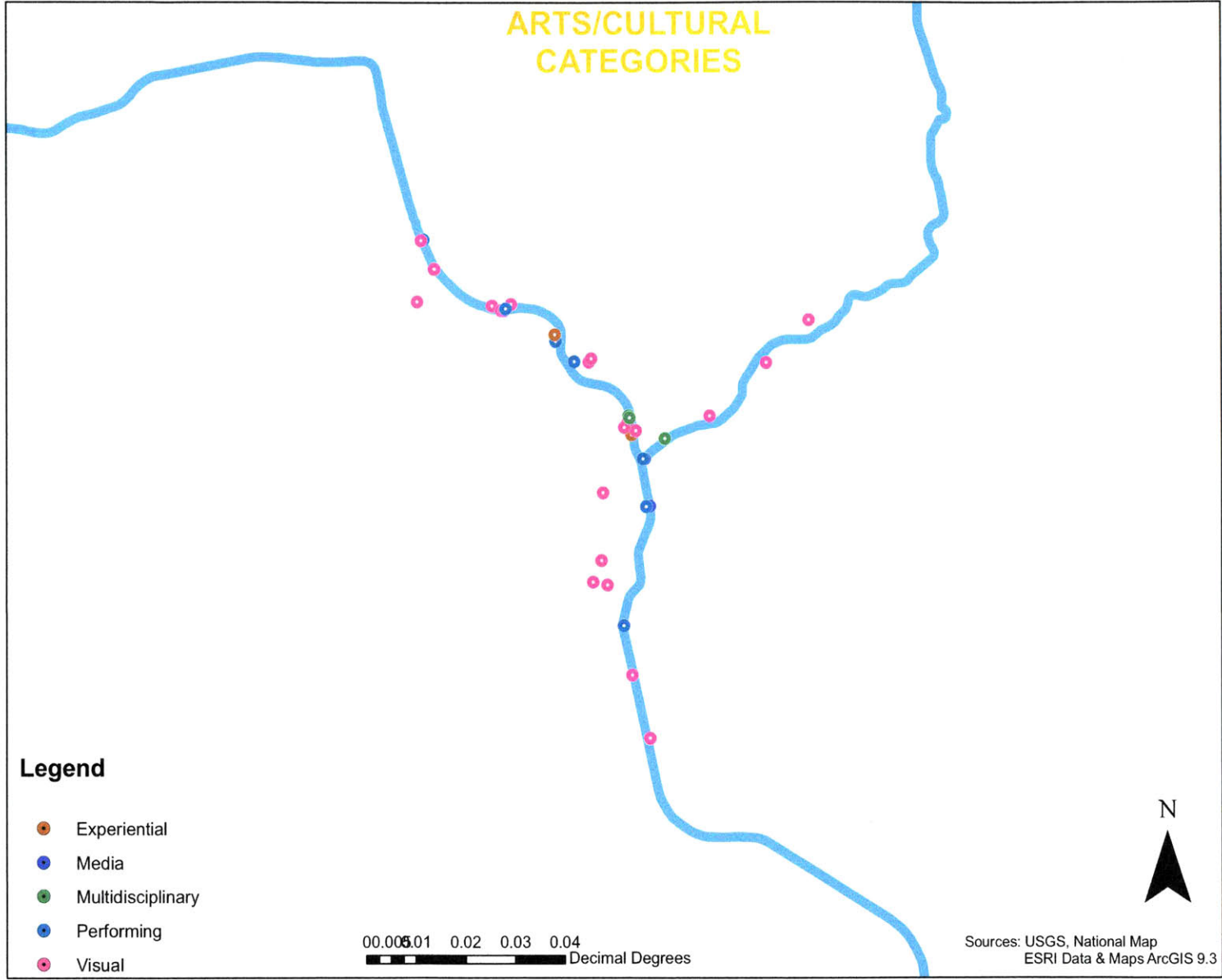
This section includes eight maps created by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software. These maps display and compare over 40 over forty of the River-based arts projects I found during my research.

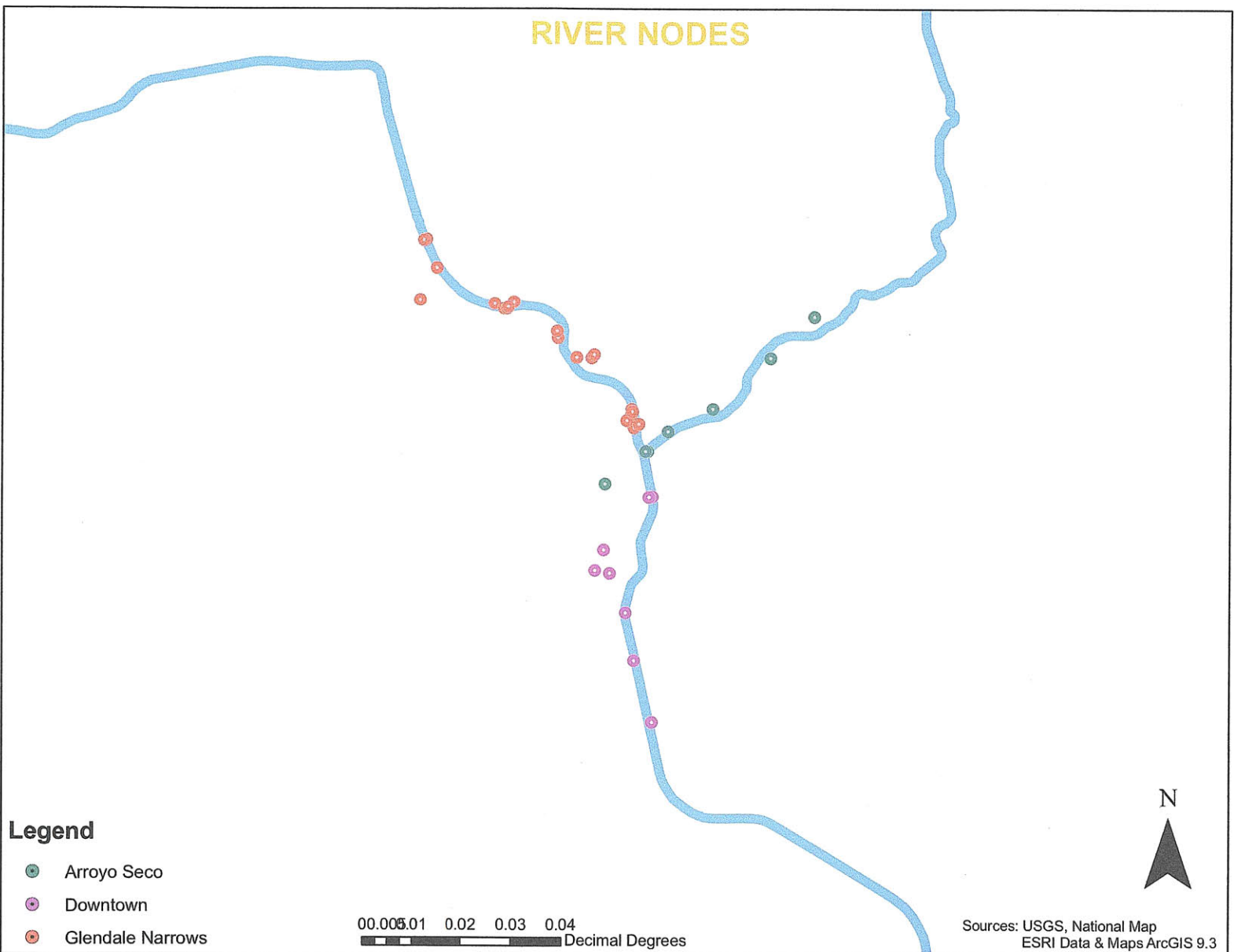
NOTE: While the data points do represent actual projects, my interest in analyzing them through GIS was to gain a general overview of patterns. Therefore, the data points are not specifically labeled.

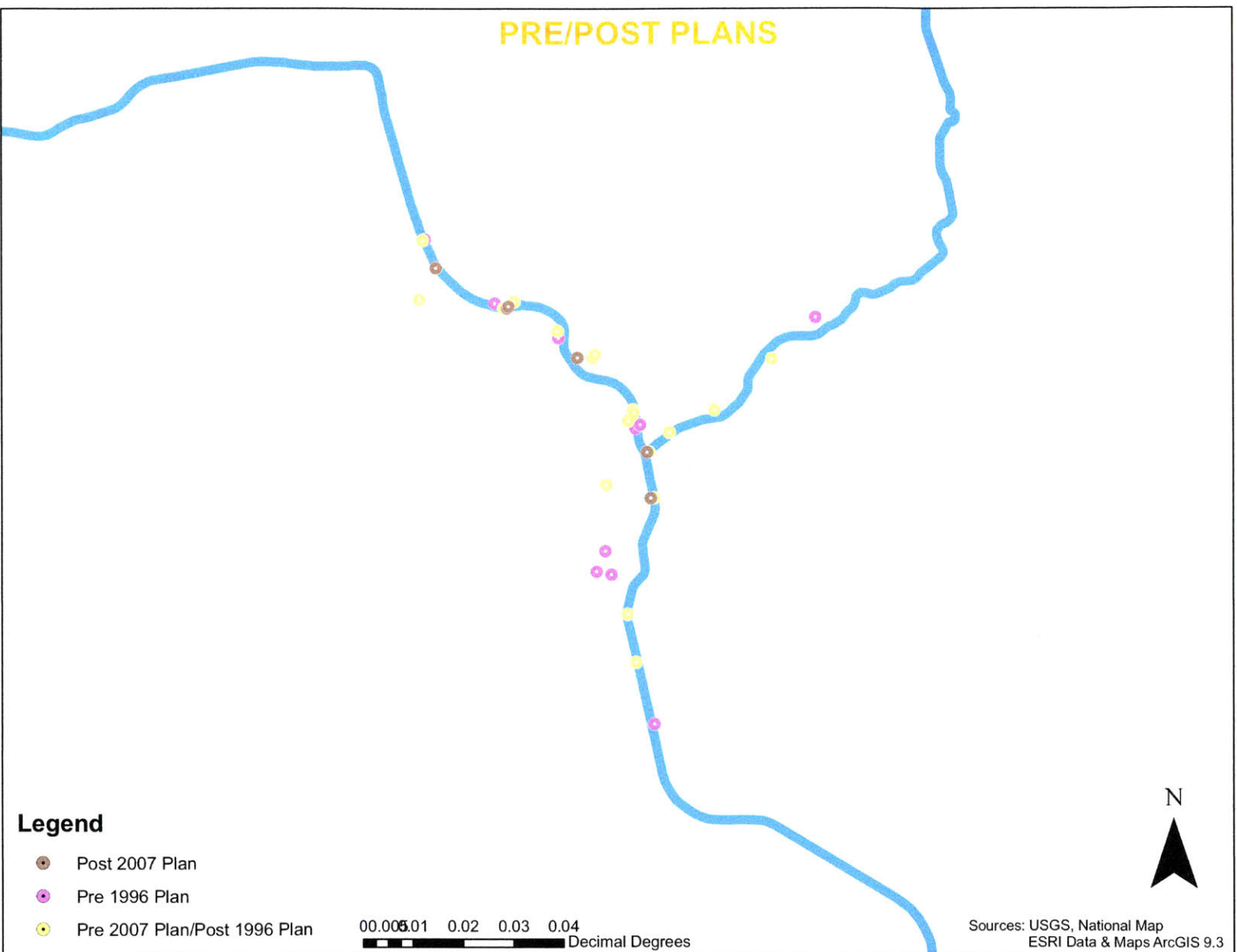
The maps include:

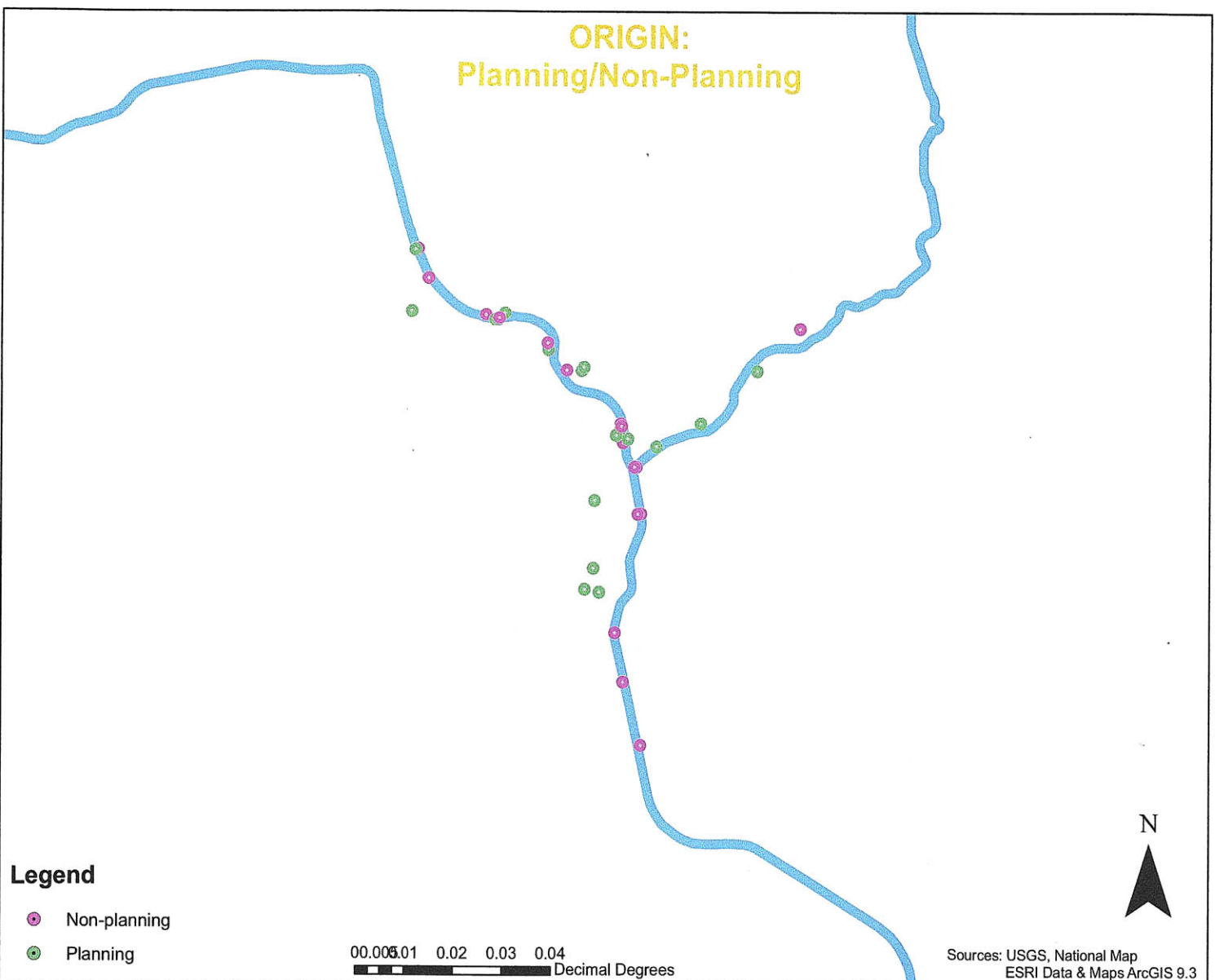
- *Use of River Space*
To what extent did the project engage with the River space?
(Hardscapes, Water, Water and Hardscapes, or Adjacent Areas)
- *Artistic Medium*
What type of art? (Visual Art, Performing Art, Multidisciplinary Art, Media Arts, or Experiential Project)
- *Nodes*
Where were the projects sited? Where did they occur?
(Glendale Narrows, Lower Arroyo Seco, or downtown Los Angeles)
- *Pre/Post Plans*
What temporal relationship did the art project have with any existing or former master planning effort over the last 20 years?
(Pre 1996 Master Plan, Pre 2007/Post 1997 Master Plans, and Post 2007 Master Plan)
- *Planning Origin*
Have projects been supported by formal planning-related agencies?
(Planning or Non-planning Supported)
- *Creator*
Who created the art project? (Group or Individual)
- *Fee Structure*
Was there a charge to attend or participate in the art project? (Free, Paid, or Donation)
- *Artist Proximity to Project*
Did the artists engaged with the River live locally or where they coming from other parts of Los Angeles? (Local or Non-Local)

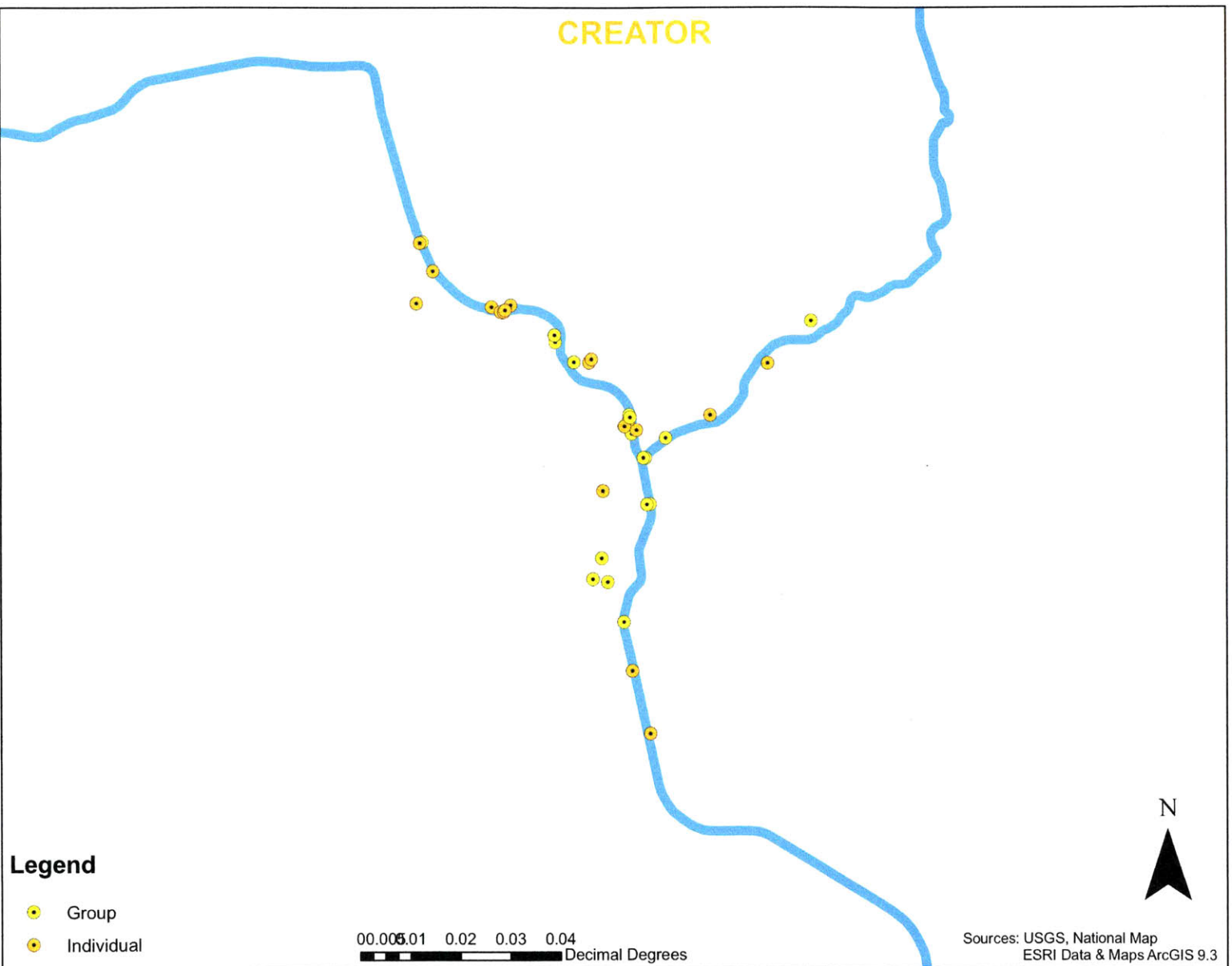


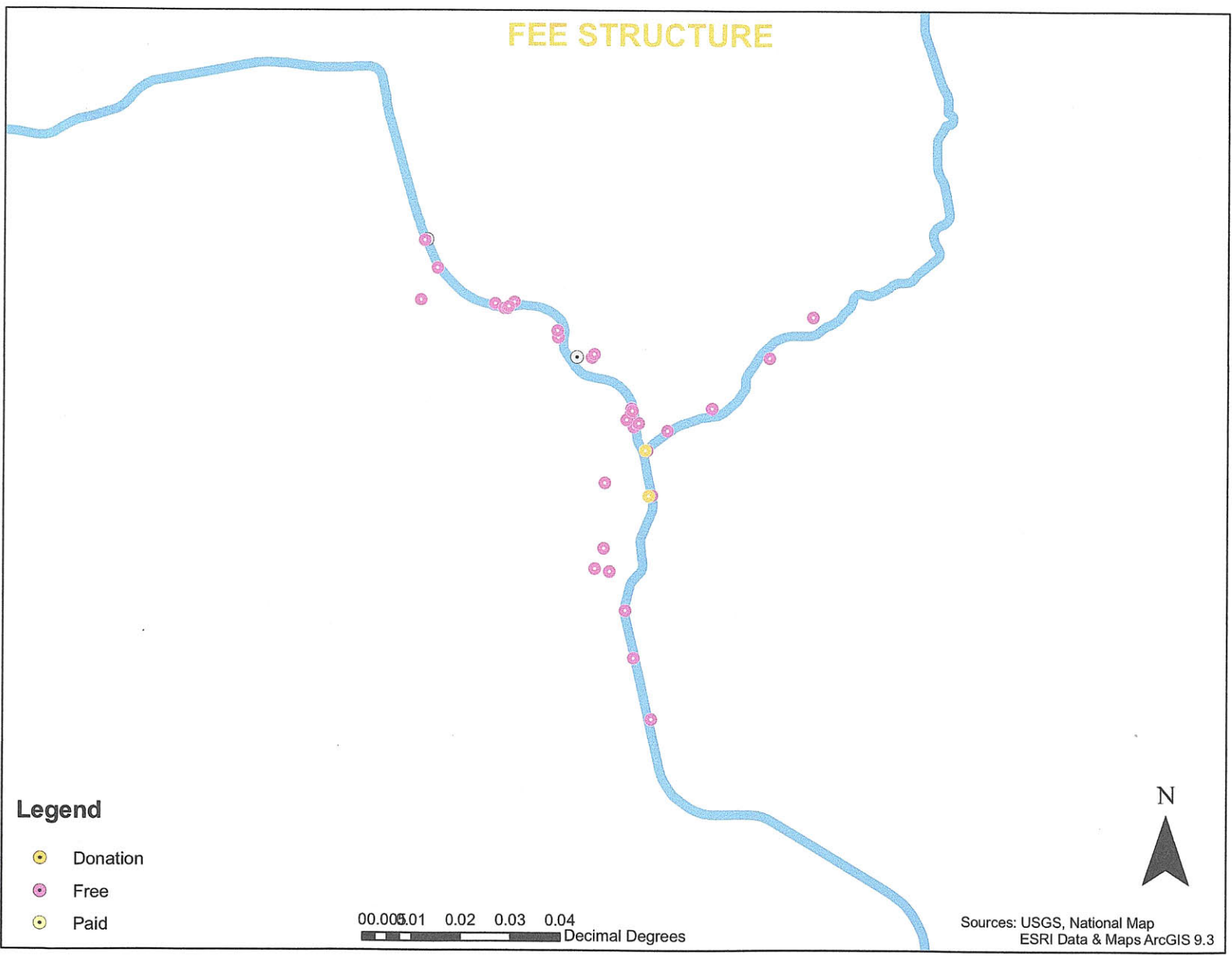












APPENDICE 2.1 Reference | LARRMP 2007 Downstream Map



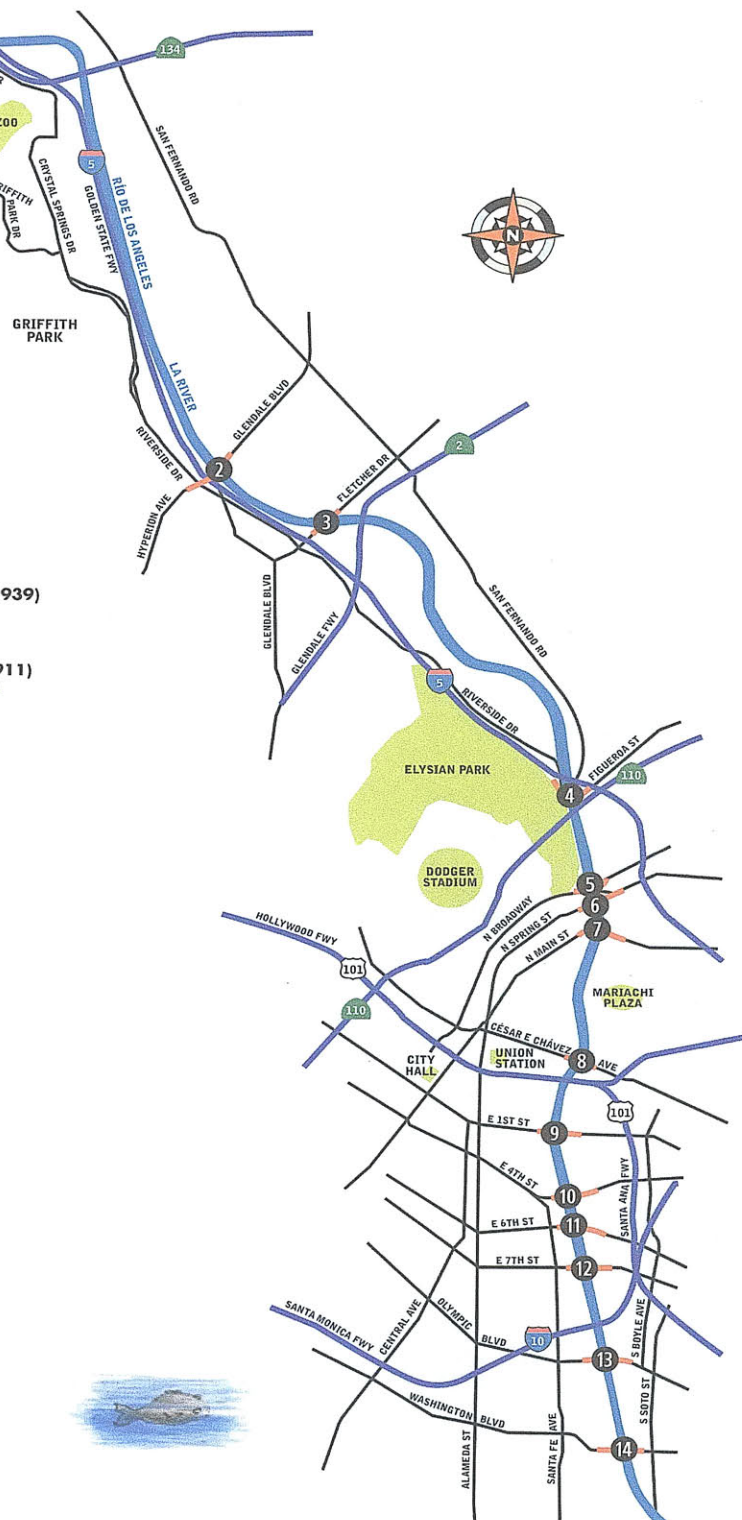
Credit: City of Los Angeles

APPENDICE 2.2 Reference | Los Angeles Conservancy "Spanning Bridges"

Historic Bridges Spanning the Los Angeles River

Los puentes históricos sobre el río de Los Angeles

- ① RIVERSIDE-ZOO DRIVE BRIDGE (1938)
PUENTE DE RIVERSIDE-ZOO DRIVE
- ② GLENDALE-HYPERION VIADUCT (1929)
VIADUCTO DE GLENDALE-HYPERION
- ③ FLETCHER DRIVE BRIDGE (1927)
PUENTE DE FLETCHER DRIVE
- ④ RIVERSIDE-FIGUEROA STREET BRIDGE (1927/1939)
PUENTE DE RIVERSIDE-FIGUEROA STREET
- ⑤ NORTH BROADWAY-BUENA VISTA BRIDGE (1911)
PUENTE DE NORTH BROADWAY-BUENA VISTA
- ⑥ NORTH SPRING STREET VIADUCT (1929)
VIADUCTO DE NORTH SPRING STREET
- ⑦ NORTH MAIN STREET BRIDGE (1910)
PUENTE DE NORTH MAIN STREET
- ⑧ CÉSAR CHÁVEZ/MACY STREET BRIDGE (1926)
PUENTE DE CÉSAR CHÁVEZ/MACY STREET
- ⑨ FIRST STREET VIADUCT (1929)
VIADUCTO DE FIRST STREET
- ⑩ FOURTH STREET VIADUCT (1931)
VIADUCTO DE FOURTH STREET
- ⑪ SIXTH STREET VIADUCT (1932)
VIADUCTO DE SIXTH STREET
- ⑫ SEVENTH STREET VIADUCT (1927/1910)
VIADUCTO DE SEVENTH STREET
- ⑬ OLYMPIC BOULEVARD VIADUCT (1925)
VIADUCTO DE OLYMPIC BOULEVARD
- ⑭ WASHINGTON BOULEVARD BRIDGE (1931)
PUENTE DE WASHINGTON BOULEVARD



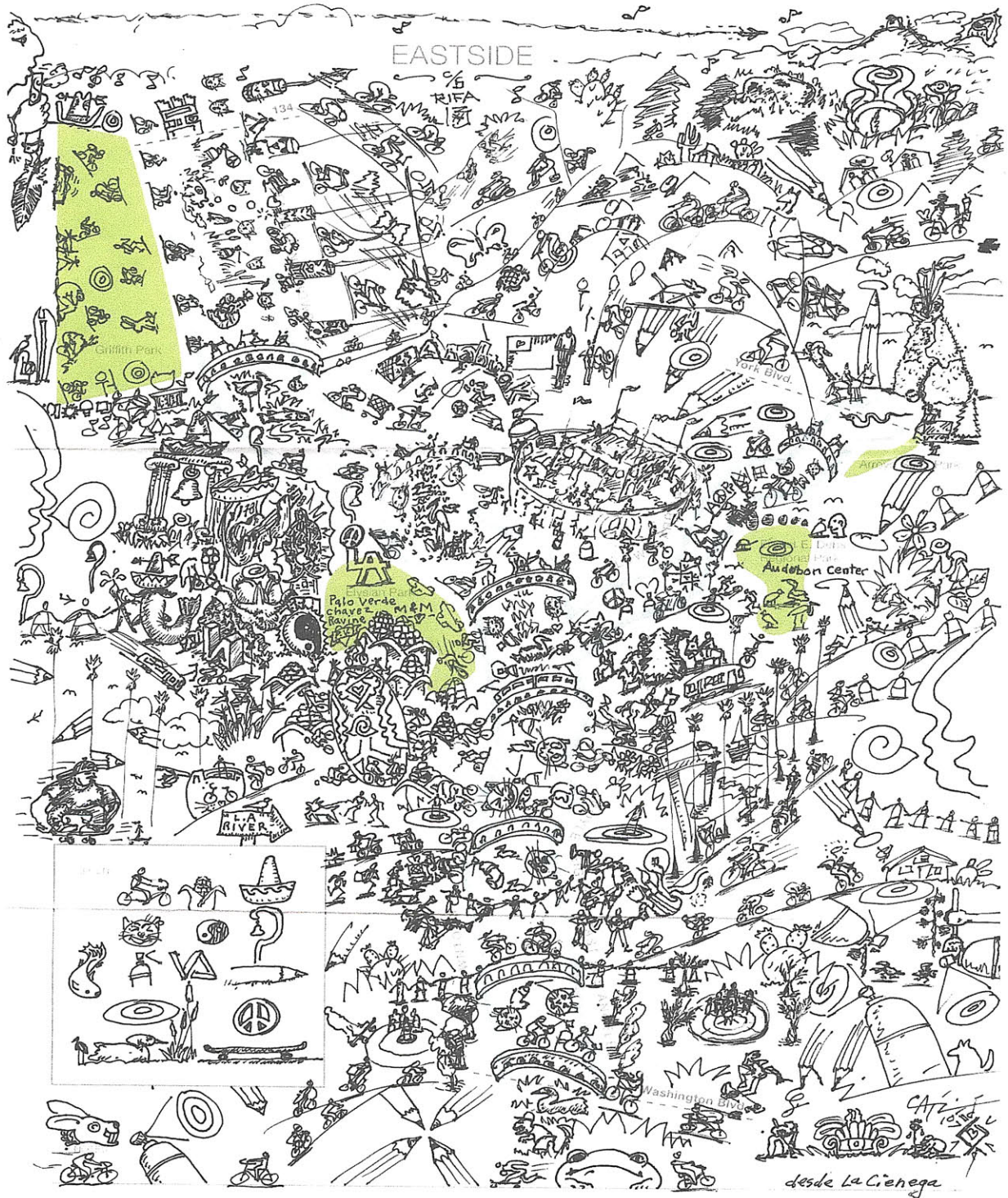
Credit: Los Angeles Conservancy

APPENDICE 3.1 Cognitive/Mental Maps | Base Map

LOS ANGELES RIVER EASTSIDE



APPENDICE 3.2 Cognitive/Mental Maps | Leo Limón



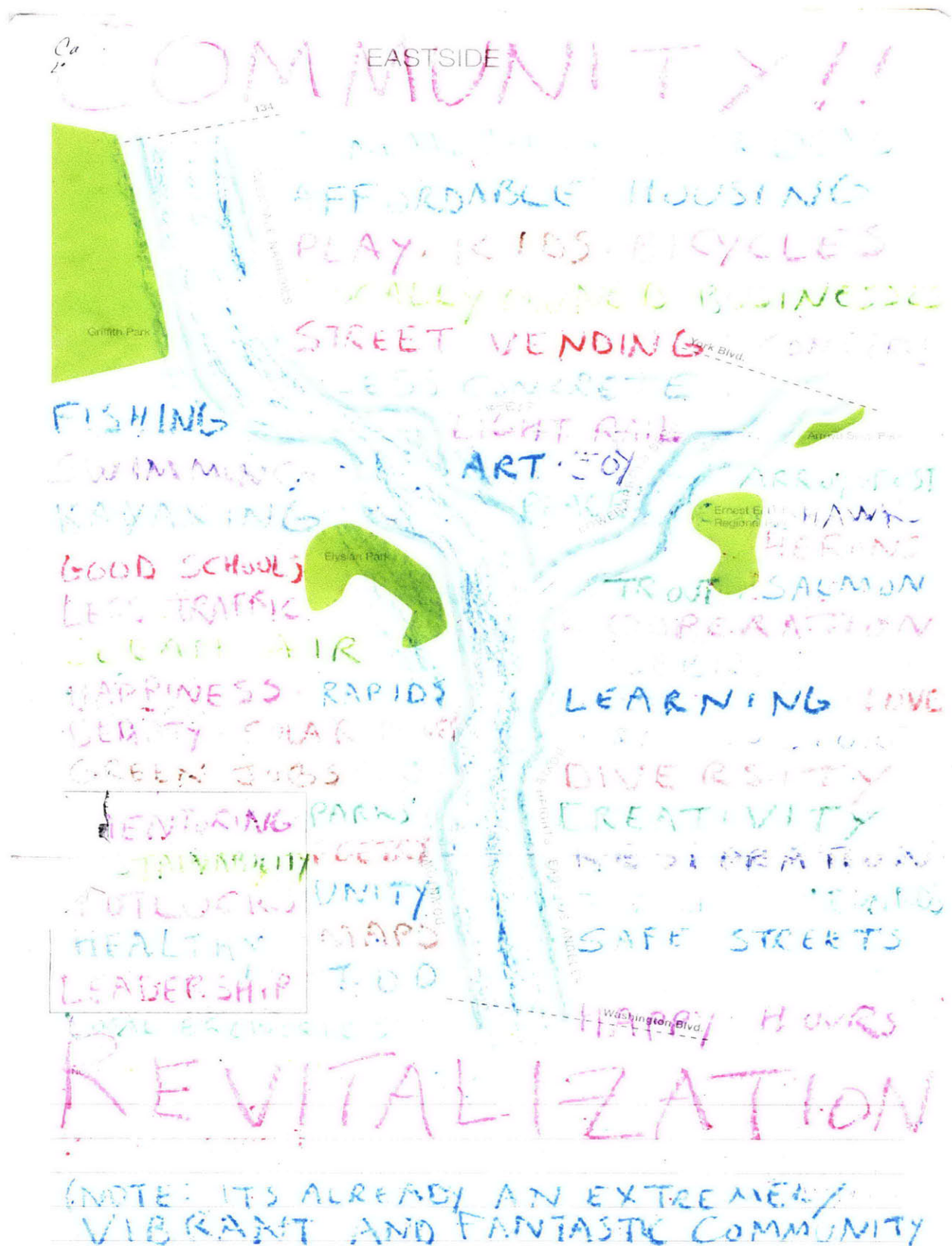
Art ⊕ Park Place

Be a part of the big picture ...

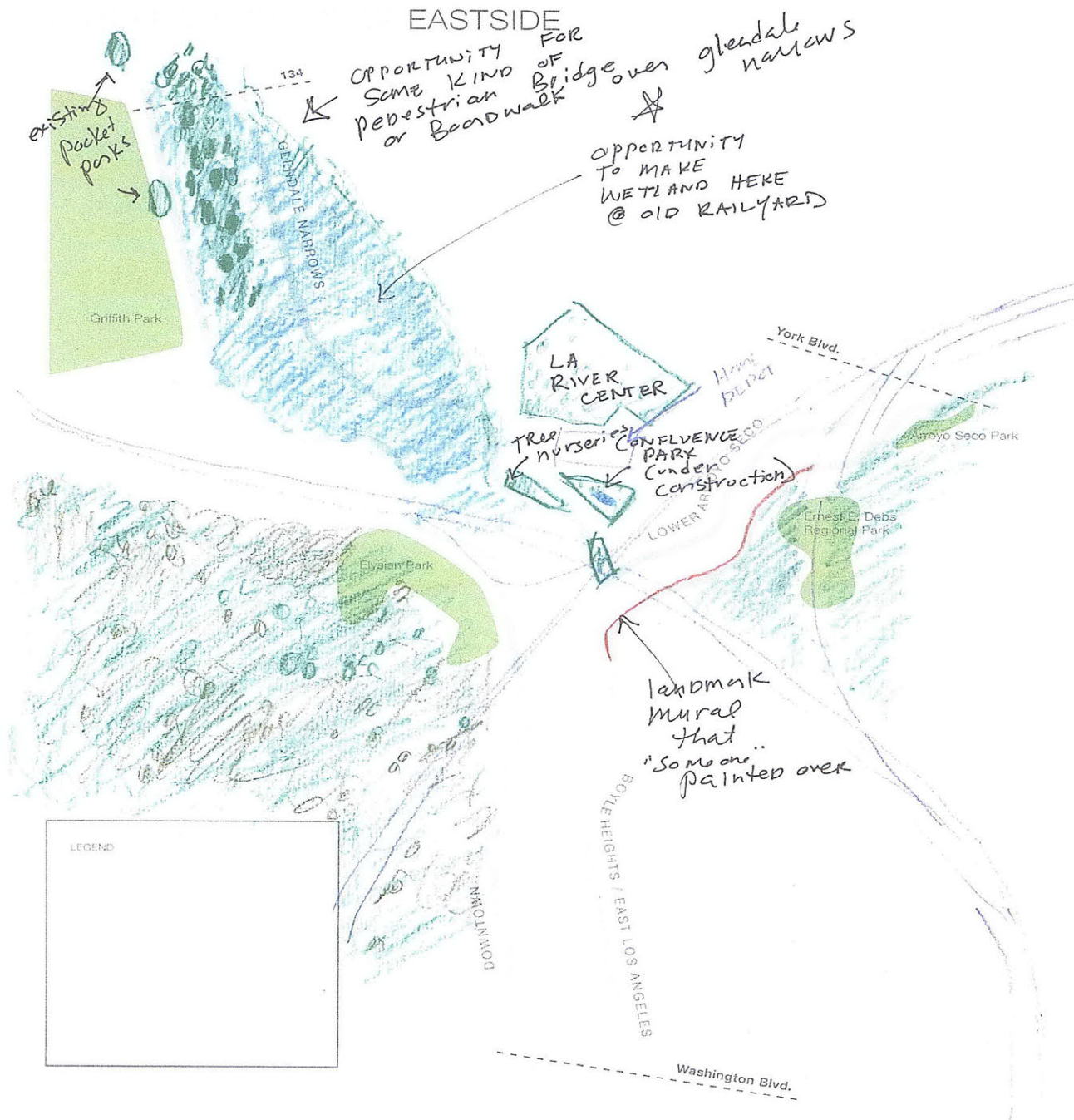
Piece 4 Peace

Bring a broom - keep it clean
orale!

APPENDICE 3.3 Cognitive/Mental Maps | Ron



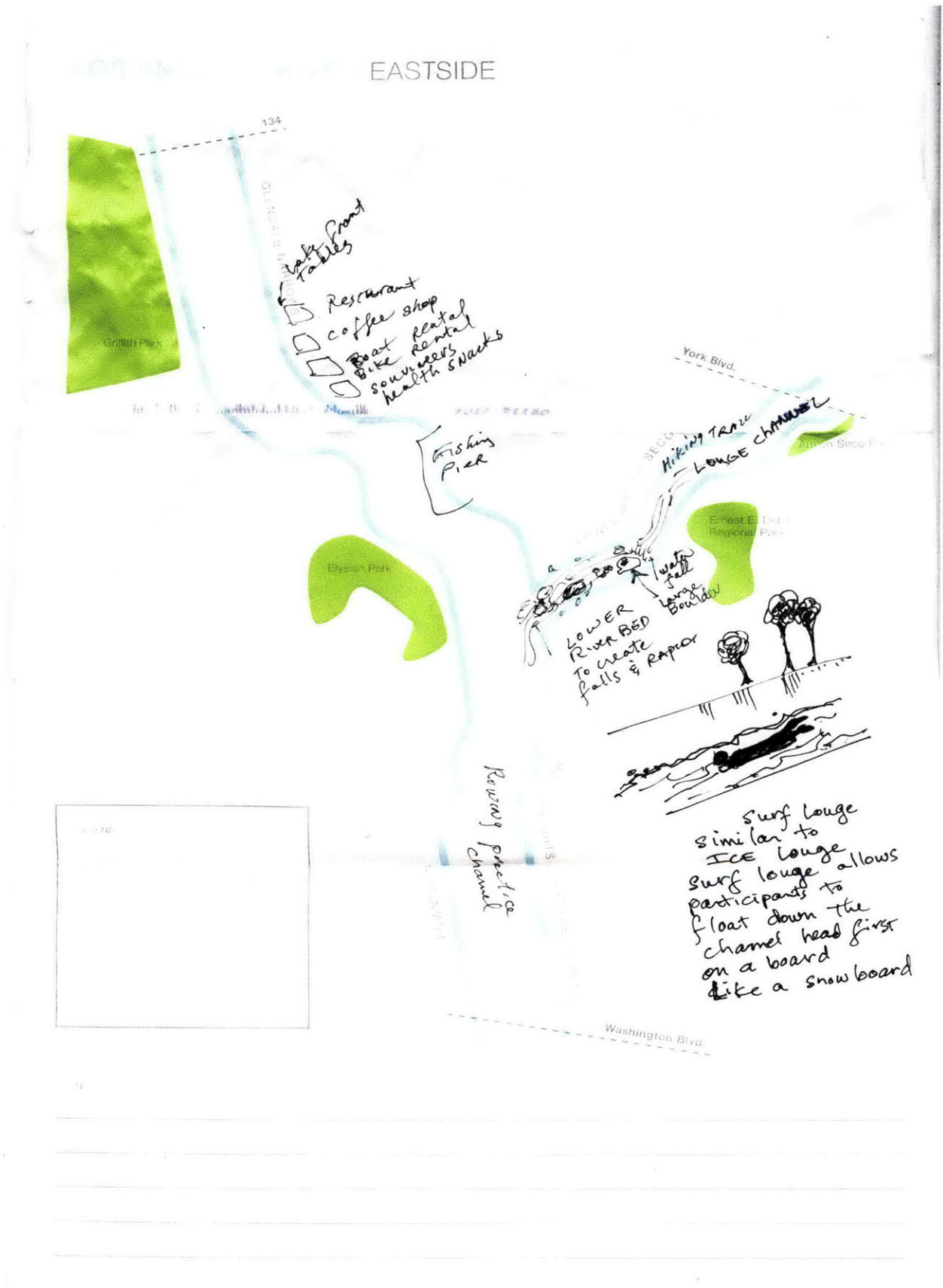
APPENDICE 3.4 Cognitive/Mental Maps | Patty



NOTES

this is a really neat area with a lot of things already happening. Confluence Park is under construction, celebrating coming together of Arroyo Seco + LA River. Opportunity to make Railyard into wetlands. Perhaps some kind of educational facility could replace Home Depot... signage + wayfinding could

APPENDICE 3.5 Cognitive/Mental Maps | Stuart



APPENDICE 3.6 Cognitive/Mental Maps | “River Enthusiast”



Go River!

ARBOR Area is 9-mile Focus area of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers + City "LA River Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study" - extending from Verdugo Wash Confluence to approx. 1st St. ARBOR stands for "Alternative w/ Restoration Benefits and Opportunities for Revitalization"

APPENDICE 4.1 Art Projects | Table of “Known” Art Projects on the River

PROJECT	Group/Artist	Year	Type	NODE
Arroyo Fest	Occidental College Urban Environmental Policy Institute	2003	Multidisciplinary	Arroyo Seco
Water Street: River of Dreams	Cherie Gaulke	2003	Statue	Arroyo Seco
Gate at the Audubon Center	Michael Amescua	2003	Sculpture	Arroyo Seco
Meeting of Styles: LA	ManONE/Crewest	2007	Film	Arroyo Seco
Liquid Landscapes	Stephan Koplowitz: Task Force	2009	Dance	Arroyo Seco
The Found Object Shrines	Bamboo Charlie	1995	Found Art	Downtown
“The Longest Graffiti Mural in the Country?”	SaberONE	1997	Graffiti	Downtown
THEM	Osseus Labyrint	1999	Performance Art	Downtown
Junction	UCLA REMAP	2007	Media Arts	Downtown
Liquid Landscapes	Stephan Koplowitz: Task Force	2009	Dance	Downtown
River CATz	Leo Limón	1970	Graffiti	Glendale Narrows
Mother Ditch	Collage Dance Theater	1995	Dance	Glendale Narrows
Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail/Mural by Frank Romero	National Park Service	1996	Heritage Trail	Glendale Narrows
De Anza Mural	Frank Romero	1997	Mural	Glendale Narrows
Guardians of the River Gate	Michael Amescua	1999	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Great Heron Gates	Brett Goldstone	1999	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Water with Rocks Gate	Brett Goldstone	2000	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Metal river fence / gates	Brett Goldstone	2000	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Life-sized metal animals	Michael Amescua	2000	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
River Visions	Arroyo Arts Collective	2000	Multidisciplinary	Glendale Narrows
Alex Baum Bicycle Bridge	Paul Hobson	2002	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
River Alchemy	Arroyo Arts Collective	2002	Multidisciplinary	Glendale Narrows
Frogtown Art Walk	Tracy A. Stone, Architect/Elysian Valley Arts Collective	2006	Art Walk	Glendale Narrows
River Bench	Suzanne Siegel	2007	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Sculpture	Jacquie Dreager	2007	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
Metal bench	Brett Goldstone	2008	Sculpture	Glendale Narrows
LA Yellow Box	Orameh Bagheri	2008	Text-based Public Art	Glendale Narrows
Touch the Water: A River Play	Cornerstone Theater	2009	Theater	Glendale Narrows
Vlatka Horvat: This Here and That There	Outpost for Contemporary Art	2009	Performance Art	Glendale Narrows

CULTURE IN CONCRETE:

Art and the Re-imagination of the Los Angeles River as Civic Space



River CATz,
Leo Limon (1970)

HARDSCAPE

- 1 Alex Baum Bicycle Bridge, Paul Hobson (2002)
- 4 Guardians of the River Gate, Michael Amescua (1999)
- 5 Metal Bench, Brett Goldstone (2008)
- 6 Water with Rocks Gate, Brett Goldstone (2000)
- 7 Great Heron Gates (incl. a serpentine river rock seating wall), Brett Goldstone (1999)
- 8 LA Yellow Box, Odameh Bagheri (2008)
- 9 River CATz, Leo Limon (1970)
- 15 Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail, National Park Service (2002)
- 17 Metal river fence and gates, Brett Goldstone (2000)
- 27 "The Longest Graffiti Mural in the Country?", SaberONE (1997)
- 28 The Found Object Shrines of Bamboo Charlie, Bamboo Charlie (1995)
- 30 Meeting of Styles: Los Angeles, ManONE/Crewest (2007)
- 32 Arroyo Fest, Occidental College Urban Environmental Policy Institute (2003)



LA Yellow Box,
Odameh Bagheri (2008)

WATER

- 3 Vlatka Horvat: This Here and That There, Outpost for Contemporary Art (2009)



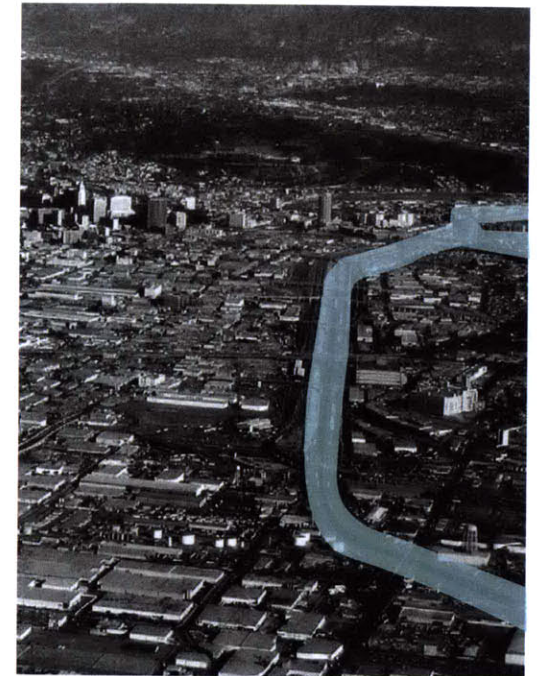
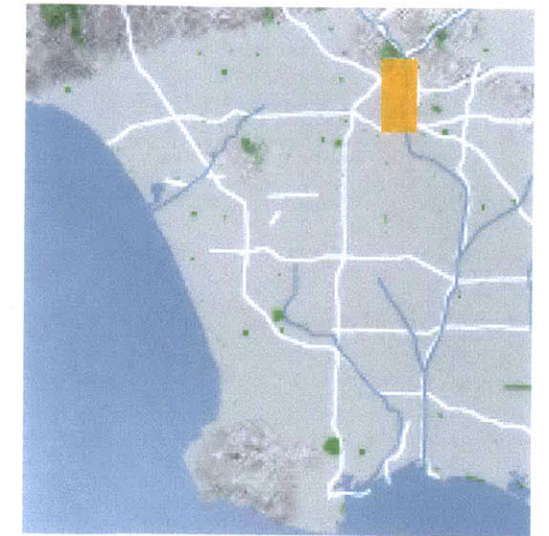
Mother Ditch,
Collage Dance Theater
(1995)

HARDSCAPE + WATER

- 2 Mother Ditch, Collage Dance Theater (1995)
- 10 Touch the Water: A River Play, Cornerstone Theater (2009)
- 12 River Visions, Arroyo Arts Collective (2000)
- 13 River Alchemy, Arroyo Arts Collective (2002)
- 21 Liquid Landscapes, Stephen Koplowitz/Task Force (2009)
- 22 Junction, UCLA ReMap (2007)
- 26 THEM, Osseus Labyrinth (1999)
- 31 Liquid Landscapes, Stephen Koplowitz/Task Force (2009)

ADJACENT SPACES

- 11 Spoken Word/Art Cafe, Elysian Valley United Community Center (1994)
- 14 Frogtown Art Walk, Tracy A. Stone, Architect/Elysian Valley United Community Center (2006)
- 16 Life-sized metal mountain lion, deer, and bear sculptures, Michael Amescua (2000)
- 18 River Bench, Suzanne Siegel (2007)
- 19 Sculpture, Jacquie Dreager (2007)
- 20 Crystal Park, Brett Goldstone (2005)
- 23 City of Dreams/River of History, Paul Diez, May Sun, and Richard Wyatt (1996)
- 24 La Sombra del Arroyo, East Los Streetscapers (1996)
- 25 ReUnion, Torgen Johnson, Noel Korten, Matthew Vanderborgh, and Kim Yasuda (1996)
- 29 Historic Arroyo Seco Parkway Sign, Louis Quirarte (2003)
- 33 Gate at the Audubon Center, Michael Amescua (2003)
- 34 Tierra de la Culebra Arts Park, Art.Community.Land.Activism (ACLA, formerly ArtsCorpsLA) (1996)
- 35 Water Street: River of Dreams, Cherie Gaulke (2003)



**Great Heron
Gates,**
Brett
Goldstone
(1999)



**Meeting of
Styles: Los
Angeles,**
ManONE/
Crewest (2007)



**Touch the
Water: A
River Play,**
Cornerstone
Theater (2009)

APPENDICE 4.2 Art Projects | Beyond the Concrete

Apart from art that has been site-specific within the River space, there are many other creative projects that have been equally inspired by the River, but occurring in exhibitions, publications, film, educational programs, and in other forms or venues outside of the River space. As a result, it is important to note the importance and relevance of projects not physically engaged with the River space. They serve as a record of River's past and present and provide credence into the regional importance and interest in the River as one of Los Angeles' most relevant and critical urban planning and urban design issues.

Photography

Landscape photography has become one of the most popular mediums artists have employed to interpret the River. Early projects included Stephen Callis' **Public Works** series and Bill Johnson's **L.A. River Bridges** series. Recent River-based photography projects have included John Humble's **A Place in the Sun** series, which documented the entire River from its origins in the Sepulveda Basin to Long Beach to serve both a publication and 2007 exhibition at The Getty Center; and Lane Barden's **The Los Angeles River: Fifty-Two Miles Downstream** series, a sequential and comprehensive visual tour of River through 52 low altitude oblique aerial photographs taken from a helicopter.

Each of Barden's photographs framed the River within its larger context and included relevant facts. The series was the subject of a 2005 exhibition at the Southern California Institute of Architecture Gallery (SCI-Arc). Barden's River-inspired artwork also included plans for a seasonal waterway between Spring Street and the Figueroa Street Bridge/Figueroa Street Viaduct supported by an inflatable dam. Other photography projects live solely online, like the photo essay created by the **Friends of Vast Industrial Concrete Kafkaesque Structures (FOVICS)**.

More recently, experiential projects like Urban Photo Adventures' **Unexposed: The Los Angeles River**, a bus-based monthly photo tour coordinated in partnership with the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), provide new ways to see the River. Geared to professional photographers, the tour is limited to 15 participants, many of which are professional motion picture location scouts, as in the case of the organization's founders, Ken Haber and Mark Indig. The tour is given over two days. Day one features sites from the Sepulveda Dam and Upper Arroyo Seco through the Glendale Narrows and downtown Los Angeles. Day two explores south through Los Angeles County's Gateway Cities and the adjacent downstream communities that feed into the Long Beach Harbor.

New Media/Multimedia

New media, online communities, and virtual tours have also served as venue for people to re-imagine and address the River. In Delirious L.A., urban designer and River tour guide Alan Loomis shares research and essays on landscape, urbanism, and architecture, including a web exhibition titled **The Los Angeles River: Past, Present, and Possibilities** that focused on not just the River bed, but the entire Los Angeles watershed basin.

Working with FoLAR, students from the Los Angeles Leadership Academy,⁷¹ and support from Adobe Youth Voices Venture Fund, KCET's⁷² New Media Department created **Departures: L.A. River**. Produced in 1999, **Departures: L.A. River** was a unique new media online documentary and tour of the resource. Through video portraits, audio portraits, and diverse digital panoramas, 24 students

⁷¹ A social justice charter high school located in Lincoln Heights. An associated elementary school is located in Los Angeles' MacArthur Park neighborhood.

⁷² KCET is the primary PBS member station for the Los Angeles region.

interviewed over 20 River advocates, artists, policymakers, residents, elected officials, and other critical actors working to improve the River's image and ecological and physical future. The project used these people to narrate the River through their own intimate personal and organizational work and engagement with the River.

Hailed by the *New York Times* as a project that "strongly suggests a new twist on the Los Angeles muralism of the 1970s," *Departures: L.A. River* features an innovative method of cultural journalism also found in *Web Stories*, KCET's online magazine. Arranged in a visually compelling format, the website allows visitors to virtually travel down the River's 52 miles. In an interview with *Networked Performance*, an online research blog, Juan Devis, KCET's New Media Producer, said "This is one of the most comprehensive online documentaries about the Los Angeles River. The scope of the project included environmental lessons and hands-on multimedia training for students that empowered them to help us tell this amazing story from multiple perspectives." KCET supplemented the project with tours and a curriculum designed by the FoLAR. Juan Devis and Justin Cram produced the exhibition.

Film

A renewed interest in the River has resulted in an outgrowth of professional and independent films and documentaries. This is an important trend for art and image on the River in that non-commercial films are beginning to offer alternatives Hollywood blockbusters. From youth produced documentaries like the Echo Park Film Center's *This is the LA River* to professional films like Eric Nazarian's award-winning *The Blue Hour*, these films have provided realistic portrayals of the River. In *52 Miles of Concrete*, Osseus Labyrinth used hyper-real and transitions of black and white images to orient viewers to the River's unique landscape. In *Los Angeles River*, Daniel Marlos created a soundless film of images collected over a year. In *The Los Angeles River*, architect Stephanie Lorenzen analyzed and explained recent large-scale revitalization and master planning efforts in an innovative 27-minute documentary. Other films took on the River's cinematic identity such as *River Madness*, Dana Play's montage of films shot on the River.

Literature

Before the last 10 years, books on the Los Angeles River were sparse. Apart from Blake Gumprecht's 1996 *The Los Angeles River: It's Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth*, few books served as comprehensive guides to the River. In 2001, journalist Patt Morrison and photographer Mark LaMonica published *Río L.A.: Tales from the Los Angeles River*, an unofficial love-letter to the River featured essays and photographs on the River's cultural, historical, architectural, biological, and industrial importance. In *Down by the Los Angeles River: Friends of the Los Angeles River's Official Guide*, Joe Linton provided detailed and comprehensive walking, cycling, and driving instructions along the River's various nodes featuring illustrations, author-produced sketches, maps, and other personal and historical anecdotes. The 2002 publication of the *Ulysses Guide to the Los Angeles River, Volume 1* was unique in that it incorporated years of artistic and biological exploration and documentation by Christopher D. Brand, Evan D. Skresderstu, Steve Martinez, and J. Matthew Brand, along with Ulysses L. Zemanova, to create a tour along River and its cultural significance. Future volumes of the Ulysses Guide will focus on architecture and history, crime and dwellers.

Fiction has also provided an interesting setting for the imagery of the River. In *White Oleander*, Janet Fitch's wrote about Astrid, a girl who grows up in a series of troubled foster homes in Los Angeles. Among her many homes, Astrid spends time with a family along Ripple Street in Frogtown, adjacent to the River. The following passage is an excerpt from the book:

“rested her arms on the damp concrete railing...The water flowed through its big concrete embankments, the bottom covered with decades of silt and boulders and trees. It was returning to its wild state despite the massive sloped shore, a secret river. A tall white bird fished among the rocks, standing on one leg like a Japanese woodcut.”

In *The Republic of East L.A.*, Luis Rodriguez shared tales of gangbangers, the homeless, working-class families, and immigrants living in the Eastside. These characters made the most of their life struggles and the urban realities of crime, poverty, unemployment, and family. Of Rodriguez’ 12 tales, the River plays an important role in “Las Chicas Chuecas,”⁷³ “Pigeon,” and “Sometimes You Dance with a Watermelon.”

In “Las Chicas Chuecas,” Rodriguez described Luna as both the moon and a loon. Of all the places she would visit to distract herself from her East L.A. family life, the River was one of her favorites.

“Well, Luna was Luna. You know. The moon. The loon. A lunatic. She was in the streets all the time. I remember her as cool, real smart, and always watching out for me. When my moms and Dad were shooting up, Luna took us places. Liver and me: to the park, to the L.A. River, to the parties she went to. She was twice my age, but she was more of a mother, you know. My mom was out of it. I love Moms. She wasn’t mean or nothing, just not all there.”

In “Pigeon,” while recounting Noemi’s rape and subsequent miscarriage, Rodriguez described that the River is the only space where she felt safe.

“I got scared. I just started walking. Graciela lives near Mission Road, close to the L.A. River. So I walked over the Sixth Street bridge. On the other side there’s an entrance to the riverbed. I walked through this tunnel. There was so much garbage and glass in there; everything stunk. There was no water, like it is lots of times. A homeless guy was sleeping in the middle of the rounded by a market cart full of cans and junk. I decided to walk—I didn’t know where. Just to walk.

Miguel was another character in “Pigeon.” A recent University of California at Berkeley graduate, Rodriguez described Miguel’s feelings about the destruction of Aliso Village and the forced removal of one of Los Angeles’ most populous Mexican communities, as well as the largest public housing complex. For Miguel, the situation at Aliso Village was no different than the removal of the Chavez Ravine⁷⁴ barrios near Dodger Stadium in the 1950s.

“Miguel felt betrayed by the razing of Aliso Village. Even though new subsidized homes were being built—with new rules that said families with known gang members would not be allowed back—and there were plans for well-to-do town houses, things would never be the same. The banks of both sides of the L.A. River here were long filled with warehouses, small manufacturing plants, and scrappy homes. It was an area ripe for revitalization. Downtown’s skyscrapers loomed large over the people of Boyle Heights, although their eyes and interests were facing the other way, to the more lucrative Westside and

⁷³ Translated into English as “the crooked girls.”

⁷⁴ Chavez Ravine was a historic working class community in Elysian Park. It was cleared to make way for present-day Dodger Stadium. Three predominant Latino communities – La Loma, Palo Verde, and Bishop – comprised the area.

beach areas. With proximity to the greatly improved Little Tokyo area, an artists' warehouse district, and the downtown banks and stores, Boyle Heights could not be seen as too valuable. In Miguel's mind, getting rid of the projects was phase one in plans to remove most of all the poor Mexicans from this neighborhood."

In "Sometimes You Dance with a Watermelon," Rosalba takes her car out for a drive – destination downtown.

"The Ford roared through the Eastside streets and avenues, across the concrete river to Alameda Street, where old Mexicanos sold fruit on the roadside while factory hands gathered in front of chain-link fences, waiting for employers in trucks to pick them up for day work. Rosalba decided to go to *el centro*—downtown."

Exhibitions

In some instances, the value of existing media has grown to require additional forms of display and representation. For example, the Pasadena Museum of California Art showcased an exhibition of art inspired by the ***Ulysess Guide to the Los Angeles River*** between February 14 and July 3, 2010. Installed in the Museum's Back Gallery, the exhibition's goal was to "encourage the public to take a closer look and examine the details of the River, from its zoological offerings to its artistic ones." According to Chaz Bojorquez, one of the artists featured in the exhibition, "This is our river; this is our community and our history, so it's more than just water down a concrete gateway" (Cooper 1). Curated by the Guide's original authors, the exhibition featured 25 local artists and was designed see the conditions of the seldom seen up-close River, changing every few weeks to reflect new soundscapes or images representing the River's various states of rebirth or decay. According to author and curator Christopher Brand:

"The point of the show is to re-create our river experiences for someone who's never seen it. Every time we've been to the river, we'd come across little things that the average person might find absolutely disgusting but to us were things of true beauty..." Everything is temporary; the river is always changing, constantly in flux. That's one of the points we're making"(Cooper 1).

In 2006, the Skirball Cultural Center presented **L.A. River Reborn**, an exhibition of contemporary photographs and video focused around artistic interpretation of the River's infrastructure. Visual artists including Lane Barden, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Anthony Hernandez, John Humble, and filmmakers Dana Plays and Gary Schwartz displayed their view of the River as a creative subject as well as an engine for social activism. "Through photographs and videos by these extraordinary artists, we hope to engage our visitors in the many complexities surrounding the Los Angeles River –its history, its ecology, and its role as subject matter in art and popular culture," said Lori Starr, former Senior Vice President, Skirball Cultural Center, and former Director, Skirball Museum. "The exhibition explores the intersections between art and social action. It manifests the Skirball's mission to connect Jewish values with American democratic ideals –including education, exploring cultural expression, and caring for the earth and for the health and welfare of all communities."

Older exhibitions included John Humble's 2007 Getty Center exhibition, **A Place in the Sun: Photographs of Los Angeles**, and Crewest Gallery's exhibition of River-based graffiti art in 2006's **River City Visions**. According to an interview with Humble in the Echo Park Film Center's *This is the LA River* documentary, "The idea is to make beautiful photographs of the River, not make the River look beautiful." There have also been many private gallery and solo artist exhibitions, such as **Fifty One**

Miles of Concrete at Los Angeles' Jan Kesner Gallery in 2002 or **Deep River**, "a finite collaborative artist project" in the form of a gallery in the River-adjacent Arts District, whose name was inspired by the River's deep historic and cultural significance in Los Angeles. The gallery was operated by Rolo Castillo, Glenn Kaino, Daniel Joseph Martinez, and Tracey Shiffman.

In 2007, g727 presented **5 Models Afloat**, an art exhibition and interactive community-based model-building project inspired by the *LARRMP*. In an effort to explore ideas about the *LARRMP*'s five focus sites, *5 Models Afloat* allowed the public to lay their visions for the River using legos, found objects, wood blocks, old knobs, tiles, and chess pieces to construct their own urban design interventions. The value of the project was to show how designs change and evolve as new participants interact with the model, allowing the project to be both intergenerational and inviting. Additionally, the model was surrounded by River-inspired art including works from Helen Campbell, Leo Limón, and Aristides Medina.



Model building workshop as a part from *5 Models Afloat*.
© James Rojas

Music

Although not as popular of a medium as the visual arts, the River has inspired top selling alternative rock singles, songs from independent bands, and folk singers to define the River. In 1991, the "#2" most popular song on the Billboard Hot 100 list was the Red Hot Chili Pepper's **Under the Bridge**. A song of their album, *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*,⁷⁵ the song referenced an undisclosed bridge. The only hint that lead singer and Los Angeles native Anthony Keitis has alluded to is that the bridge is, as the lyrics say "under the bridge downtown." The cover of the song's CD single features a black and white picture of downtown Los Angeles, with the Sixth Street Bridge/Sixth Street Viaduct and Seventh Street Bridge/Seventh Street Viaduct prominently at the foreground.

Smaller, independent bands have also taken an interest in the River. In their 2008 album, *Hymn and Her*, Earlimart wrote a song about Brett Goldstone's popular River sculpture aptly titled **Great**

⁷⁵ Artist's spelling of "magic."

Heron Gates. Earlier, in 1993, Mark Oliver Everett (E from The Eels) and Jennifer Condos wrote **L.A. River**, a song of 1993's *Broken Toy Shop*.

Walkin' by the L.A. River,
Stepping on broken glass, kicking cans...
Walkin' along by the L.A. River,
Reading graffiti and throwing stones...

In the folk tradition, local musician and visual artist, Alan Nakagawa, wrote **Deep River**, a song off his album *L.A. Urban Folk* in honor of the former Deep River Gallery.

Take me to Deep River
Take me to the show
Take me to Deep River
Going to take it real slow
Give me sweet salvation
Give me what I know
Give me sweet salvation
Gonna need it for my soul...

Other songs include Woody Guthrie's **The New Years Flood**, a song commemorating a January 1934 flood that killed over 100 people and West Coast jazz arranger Russell Garcia's 2005 full-length release, **Los Angeles River**.

Education

Renewed interest in the River has also generated a host of school-based projects and curriculum. In 2008, high school students from Oakwood School and John Marshall High School collaborated on **Del Rio**, a traveling mural and documentary project about the Los Angeles River that was exhibited at various local high schools and g727. In the Glassell Park Improvement Association's **I See My River Project**, over 250 students created poetry and land art about the River's water cycle. Through a partnership with the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts') Community Arts Partnership (CAP), Taking the Reins channeled their work on horse-training and riding with underserved girls in Los Angeles to create **Pegasus**, a poetry anthology inspired in part by the stable's adjacent River banks in Atwater Village. And in 2008, the Los Angeles Conservancy, in partnership with FoLAR and the Getty Conservation Institute, curated **Spanning History**, a series of events related to the River's historic bridges. Along with a tour, panel presentations, and book signings, the events also included a bilingual kids' guide to the historic River bridges. Other educational projects include Susan Boyle and Cherie Gaulke's 12-minute film, **The LA. River Project**, created with students at Wilson High School and the 2006 documentary completed by New Heights Preparatory, a charter school in Northridge, CA.

Public Art

Public art about the River has taken the form of sculpture, poetry, murals, mosaics, and performance, mostly funded by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA's) Metro Art program⁷⁶. Examples of these pieces are most prominent along the Metro Gold Line, Metro Red Line, or at Union Station's Gateway Plaza. Beginning at Union Station's Gateway Plaza, the four-part **City of Dreams/River of History** by Paul Diez, May Sun, and Richard Wyatt feature a "river bench" clad in

⁷⁶ Metro Board policy mandates that 0.5% of Metro Rail construction costs be allocated for public art.

rocks from the River and the Tujunga Creek. Other projects include **La Sombra del Arroyo**, a mural depicting the Arroyo Seco by the Eas Los Streetscapers and **ReUnion** by Torgen Johnson, Noel Korten, Matthew Vanderborgh, and Kim Yasuda, which created River-inspired leaf-shaped canopies over bus bays.

Along the Metro Gold Line, the most prominent River art can be found at the Lincoln/Cypress Station. This station features Cherie Gualkie's **Water Street: River of Dreams**, which includes a prominent life-size bronze sculpture of a Tongva woman drawing water from an imaginary river as well as cascading arroyo stones and a 35-foot long triptych "story fence" with a quote from current chieftess of the Gabrielino/Tongva Nation referring to the River as a space. The piece also features a poem by Lewis MacAdams that refers to the River as a concrete-corseted woman whose laugh can still be heard. According to the artist statement on Metro Art's website:

"Having grown up near the mighty Mississippi, that concrete ditch called the LA River seemed a pitiful sight. Yet as I learned more about it I began to feel for its loss. It had once been a dreamy flow overhung with trees and stocked with fish. It had nurtured tribal people but baffled the early settlers with its unpredictability. The coyote story is a metaphor: Our human-made roads, freeways, and train tracks come and go, but the river is always there."

More public art can be found in many of the NET pocket parks along Elysian Valley, Michael Amescua's **Gate at the Los Angeles River** (Griffith Park) and at the Audubon Center at Debs Park, and Jacquie Dreager's sculptures and Suzanne Siegel's **River Bench** commissioned by The City Project at the Rio de Los Angeles State Park in Taylor Yard.

APPENDICE 4.3 Art Projects | “Re-Envisioning the L.A. River” Series Art Projects

Project	Medium	Artist	Date	Venue/Location
A Conversation by the River	Literature and poetry	John Swift (Literature), Lew MacAdams (poetry)	September 9, 1989	Los Angeles River Center and Gardens
Words about the River	Poetry	Russell C. Leong, Majid Naficy, Michele Serros, Michael Datcher, Ruben Martinez, Amy Gerstler, and Martha Ronk	November 10, 1999	Samuelson Pavilion at Occidental College
The Ephemeral River: The Los Angeles River in Ephemeral Literature	Photography and graphic arts	Emily Bergman (librarian)	March 3 -May 18, 2000	Occidental College Library
<i>And Yet, It Is a River</i>	Poetry and photography	Ruben Martinez (poetry), Stephanie Strickler (photography)	March 4 – April 7, 2000	Los Angeles River Center and Gardens
Oxy Looks at the River	Drawings, print making designs, photographs, and posters	Linda Lykke (and art class participants)	April 1 – 30, 2000	Occidental College
Water Marks: Art Inspired by the L.A. River	Visual arts (multidisciplinary)	James Doolin, Richard Espinoza, Cheri Gaulke, Gary Hall, Leo Limón, Barrie Mottishaw, Karen Neubert, Barbara Horosko Nichols, Lauren Richardson, and Nancy Romero.	April 3, 2000	Eagle Rock Community and Cultural Center
River Visions: Exhibit at the River Center	Photography and painting	Various artists	June 9-July 14, 2000	Los Angeles River Center and Gardens

APPENDICE 5.1 Positive Future Directions | Landscape Urbanism Cases

The following list of projects offer positive directions to reference, but not necessarily fully adopt, as the Los Angeles River is its own case – one that presents Los Angeles a great opportunity to express its individuality. From Barcelona to Berlin, and Seattle to New York, these projects offer promising directions for the future of the Los Angeles River and thus, the future of Los Angeles. While rivers may be an integral component, none of the projects are traditional urban river or waterfront redevelopment projects. These projects provide urban planners, urban designers, and policymakers in Los Angeles a framework to consider applicable, but non-traditional, projects for the case of the Los Angeles River. They are listed in chronological order to illustrate the progression of urban planning and urban design within each project.

Gas Works Park (1975)

Richard Haag
Seattle, Washington

Richard Haag's Gas Works Park in Seattle was an important predecessor to Germany's Landschaftspark. Rather than removing the former Seattle Gas Light Company's gasification plant, Haag's design respected the 19.1-acre site's history and created a mound for soil remediation to allow people to understand the process of change. Located on Lake Union's north shore, the gasworks plant progressed from manufacturing gas from coal, and later converting it to crude oil. The import of natural gas rendered the plan obsolete in the 1950s, until it was acquired by the City of Seattle for a park in 1962⁷⁷.

In an early and imaginative re-purposing of industrial infrastructure, Haag's design converted the boiler house to a picnic shelter and the plant's exhausted-compressor building into a children's play barn, including a maze of bright machinery. While not a full restoration, the design of Gas Works Park incorporated many structures associated with the plant. Not only was this important given the plant's history as the sole remaining gasification plant in the United States, but it also affected the required additional measures set forth by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Washington State Department of Ecology. The park has served as a venue for protests, social gatherings, film productions, bike rides, and other cultural events, and at one time was informally

⁷⁷ The \$1,340,000 purchase price was provided by Forward Thrust bonds. H.U.D. payments were made from 1962 to 1972, until the debt was retired.

renamed PeaceWorks Park during an anti Gulf War vigil in the early 1990's. The recipient of numerous awards and international acclaim, a jury for the President's Award of Excellence stated that Gas Works Park was:

"A remarkably original and attractive example of how to reclaim a seemingly hopeless and obsolete industrial installation. Instead of being destroyed or disguised, it has been transformed into a lighthearted environment ... A project of historical significance for the community. A symbol of American technology preserved" ("Gas Works Park).

While industrial spaces at this scale do not exist along the River, smaller interventions occurring in under-utilized railroad buildings, the Old City Jail, the National Guard Armory along the Lower Arroyo Seco, and other former civic structures may be similarly programmed in light of their industrial importance to the area.

Parc de la Villette (1984-1987)

Bernard Tschumi
Paris, France

At 55 hectares (35 of which are green space), Parc de la Villette is the largest fully-landscaped park in Paris. Located in the city's 19th arrondissement, the park borders the Boulevard Périphérique suburbana area of Seine-Saint-Denis. Bernard Tschumi designed the park as part of a 1982-83 design competition in response to an urban redevelopment project on the site of 19th century slaughterhouses built by Napoléon III. It was built between 1984 and 1987. The park houses a variety of public educational facilities, including venues for science and music, children's playgrounds, and thirty-five modern architectural follies⁷⁸. The park includes Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie and La Géode, an Omnimax domed theatre.

Accessible by several Metro rail stations, the park has become a popular attraction for both locals and tourists, drawing an estimated 10 million of people each year to engage in the an array of arts and cultural activities. The success of the park is due to its intergenerational design, one that allows for spaces for exploration and activity for both adults and children. Inspired by Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist philosophies, Tschumi resisted a conventional park approach in lieu of creating a unique space for activity and interaction. A vast area, the park provides a certain freedom. It is divided by the Orucq Canal, which offers boat ride tours as well as a route for festivals, artist conventions, and other performances.

⁷⁸ A structure primarily constructed for landscape decoration or ornamentation.

Perhaps the most representative element of Tschumi's park design is the park's iconic follies. These structures serve both as points of reference for visitors as well as reminders of the steel structures and warehouses that once dominated the park's industrial fabric. While many of the follies remain un-programmed, they are flexible enough to be adapted to restaurants, informational centers, and other needs not considered in Tschumi's original design. This is one of the many successes of Tschumi's vision. The park can change according to the needs of its users, acting as a frame for culture and civic interaction. Tschumi's flexible design suggests an innovative approach to industrial-heavy areas and would provide for a relevant design framework to consider along the River.

Landschaftspark (1991)

Latz + Partner

Duisburg Nord, Germany

Landschaftspark in Duisburg Nord, Germany is perhaps one of the most popular examples of the landscape urbanism approach to civic space development. The centerpiece of the park is a decommissioned former steel mill and coal production plant that, upon closing in 1985, left the area polluted. In 1991, Latz + Partner was selected among five international planning teams to design the park on account of the firm's intention to recognize, understand, and celebrate the site's industrial past. Latz's plan employed phytoremediation to clean polluted soils, adaptively reused underutilized structures, and re-appropriated a former sewage canal into a system for cleaning the site.

The design of the park relied on the context of the site's existing conditions and segmentation. It is known as "Park Land without frontiers." Latz worked with existing roads, railways, and vegetation, as well as existing materials found on the park land. Latz connected the park via a series of walkways and waterways that followed the site's former railways and sewer systems. In an innovative approach to programming 10 years in the making, concrete bunkers became spaces for gardens, gas tanks are now pools for scuba divers, and the central space of the site's steel mill now serves as a piazza.

Latz buried the sewage canal that was historically constructed on the site of the Old Emscher River, replaced it with a new canal, the Emscher River, in the same form as its predecessor. The value of the canal's design lies in her ability to teach people about the change of the region's water processes over time on a seasonal basis.

The basis of Latz' design was inherently post-modern, one which uses memory as a significant programmatic element of site design. Latz explains that the park is designed with the idea that former plant employee could walk his family through the site explaining his various associations with the space. Latz's emphasis on memory is not analogous to preservation, but rather offers that memory is

not static – it has multiple layers that can shift and change according to a person’s life experiences. Latz stated that “...interrelations must be made concrete and visible and that the viewer will create their own picture of a place, not the designer” (Latz 94, 96). For Latz, this approach allowed each visitor to experience the park in his own way and create his own story and experience, ones that feeds the cultural needs of park visitors.

Today the park is open 24 hours a day and offers free admission. Overall, the design of Landscaftpark offers the Los Angeles River a unique opportunity to consider flexible, multi-layered, and intergenerational cultural programming while simultaneously teaching visitors about the history of the River, the city, and future of region’s water challenges. The role of history is just as important along the Los Angeles River. “Unless there’s an educational process related to the history and future of the River, then none of this means anything to youth who are familiar with the space, but lack any place to express themselves,” said Tricia Ward, executive director for Los Angeles’ Art...Community...Land...Activism!, an organization that manages Tierra de la Culebra Art Park adjacent to the Lower Arroyo Seco.

Parc Nus de la Trinitat (1993)

Joan Roig and Enric Batlle
Barcelona, Spain

Opened in 1993, Parc Nus de la Trinitat is located inside a circular motorway junction in northeast Barcelona. Translated to the “Trinity Knot,” the park stands at one of the most congested motorway interchanges⁷⁹ in Barcelona. The scale of the 6-hectare park is defined by a wall of trees that form a filter between the motorway and the park. The park was designed with a circular gallery in order to divide it into distinct inner and an outer areas. The interior of the park also includes public art (sculpture) and access to a subway line that connects the park to larger regional parks in the neighborhood. Designed by Joan Roig and Enric Batlle, the park offers the Los Angeles River potential design solutions for creating civic space near the Arroyo Seco Confluence (and the planned Confluence Park along Riverside Drive) as well as the area of River in downtown Los Angeles commonly referred to as “The Stack,” where a series of major freeway interchanges contribute to the existing difficulty in accessing the site.

⁷⁹ Motorways that meet at the park include: Ronda de Dalt, Ronda Litoral, C-58 Highway Sabadell-Terrassa-Manresa, Motorway C-33 Girona-France, and the Highway to Maresme.

Schouwburgplein (1996)
West 8
Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Designed by West 8 as an interactive civic space, Schouwburgplein sits at the heart of Rotterdam. Emphasizing its void, the space encompasses 12,250 square meters and opened to the public in 1996. Its proximity to the city's municipal theater, concert hall, central rail station, and shopping and retail centers make it a prime location.

The square relies on its relationship with the sun to dictate its use. Mosaics on the floor reflect various sunlight-zones. Its west side is covered with silver leaves while its east side incorporates warm materials including rubber and timber decking, as well as a wooden bench that spans the length of the area. The square's main focal point are three fifteen-meter high ventilation towers made of lightweight steel. Similar to the form of cranes, these structures are activated with LED displays, which also inform the perforated metal panels at the center of the square. Linear lights mounded under the raised deck provide a floating illusion, which can be controlled by anyone engaged in the space. While the Los Angeles River is a physical void, it would be a challenge to replicate this space. Instead, Schouwburgplein's lighting design may inform a coordinated effort to highlight the iconic River bridges along the downtown Los Angeles segment of the River.

Downsview Park (1999)
Bruce Mau Design, Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Oleson Worland, and Petra Blaisse
Toronto, Canada

Located on the site of a 260-hectare former Canadian Forces Base in Toronto's north end Downsview district, the land was held in a conservation trust when the base closed in 1996. The trust transferred the title to Parc Downsview Park Inc. (PDP) in 1996 for the creation of Downsview Park. In total, the park includes 231 hectares (20 hectares were retained by the Canada's Department of National Defense). Within these 231 hectares, 130 hectares are dedicated to traditional open space and recreational and cultural facilities while 102 hectares are dedicated to uses that would create a sustained revenue stream for the planning and management of the park.

The park has been the site of various cultural events and social activities. A recent project, the first phase of park construction began in 2005, which included soil remediation and the initial planting of the Canada Forest. This gesture was inspired by the Park's 1999 International Design Competition in which by Bruce Mau Design, Rem Koolhaas/OMA, Oleson Worland, and Petra Blaisse's "Tree City" design scheme was awarded the winning design. The Park is accessible by two subway

stations on the Park's eastern edge and continues to host a variety of year-round and intergenerational cultural, agricultural, and recreational events. The action to establish a park on the site also led to the development of the Downsview Lands Community Voice Association, one that acts as an advocacy organization for governments regarding issues concerning the lands held in perpetuity.

While sites along the River such as Taylor Yards and the Cornfields have already been appropriated as traditional green space, other spaces like Mission Junction⁸⁰ and the Piggyback Yard⁸¹ provide potential sites for international design competitions and cultural events.

Freshkills Park (2006)

Field Operations
New York, New York

With almost three times the acreage of Central Park, Staten Island's Freshkills Park is a landfill reclamation project. At 2,200 acres, the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) serves as the lead operating agency, in partnership with the NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY). A phased 30-year project, construction on the park's five major sections began in October 2008. The value of the park lies in its ability to accommodate a range of cultural, recreational, and educational uses built upon a multi-modal network of paths for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians.

The origins of the park's design came from an international design competition held in 2001. Of the six short-listed landscape architecture firm proposals, James Corner's Field Operations was selected as the winner to produce a master plan, which was published in March 2006. The master plan, which envisioned the site as five parks in one, was later amended according to input from local abutters, government officials, not-for-profit groups, and a Community Advisory Group ("Draft Master Plan Overview"). The five parks on the site included The Confluence (made up of Creek Landing and The Point), North Park, South Park, East Park, and West Park. Each park has distinct programs, ranging from passive and active recreation, restaurants, spaces and venues for cultural events, water access, bird watching, picnicking, athletic facilities, and a monument to the events of September 11, 2001. According to the DPR programming goals:

⁸⁰ A former rail yard at the corner Cesar Chavez Avenue and Mission Road. It is commonly referred to as "Naud Junction."

⁸¹ A 125 acre parcel of land situated midway along the Los Angeles River and owned by the Union Pacific Railroad.

“Freshkills Park will host an incredible variety of public spaces and facilities for social, cultural and physical activity, for learning and play. The site is large enough to support many sports and programs that are unusual in the city, possibilities of which include horseback riding, mountain biking, nature trails, kayaking, and large-scale public art.”

Considering the “Five Park” approach to Field Operation’s Freshkills master plan, the Los Angeles River Revitalization Master Plan (*LARRMP*) can gain a broader view on how to cohesively design and program, but not over-program, the River’s various sites.

The High Line (2009)

Field Operations/Diller Scofidio + Renfro
New York, New York

As one of the most recent examples of industrial infrastructure’s transformation into civic space, New York City’s High Line opened to much interest in June 2009. A 1.45-mile park, it was built on a segment of a former elevated freight railroad’s West Side Line in Manhattan’s Lower West Side.

In the mid 1800s, the City of New York authorized the creation of street-level rail tracks along Manhattan’s West Side, an act that allowed for direct warehouse-to-freight car service. Numerous accidents would lead the City and State of New York and the New York Central Railroad to develop the West Side Improvement Project, one which included a 13 mile long railroad track (“High Line History”). The High Line opened in 1934 and conveniently ran inside factories in order to prevent street-level traffic disturbance. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the need for cargo transit dropped and the High Line closed.

Amidst community members and rail enthusiasts, several attempts to re-establish rail service on the Line led to the formation of the Friends of the High Line, a not-for-profit group that advocated for public open space. While not an immediately popular idea among elected officials (the park was originally slated for demolition under the administration of New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani), the High Line is proving its worth as civic space. City funding was allocated \$50 million for the Park in 2004. Currently the park only includes the southernmost section of the park, from Gansevoort Street to 20th Street. Future phases of the park include the middle segment, as well as potentially the northern section, an area owned by the CSX railroad company. The opening of the High Line has been the catalyst for more than 30 new neighborhood improvement projects in Chelsea (Poegrebin “First Phase of High Line Is Ready for Strolling”).

The park includes native plantings, unique views of the city and the Hudson River, and concrete walkways alongside plantings. The Line was used as an example in Alan Weissman’s 2007

best-selling non-fiction book about the future of the natural and built environment without humans, *The World Without Us*. With the advantage of New York City's cultural cache, the Line has maintained a strong connection to the arts. Artists and arts-related businesses and organizations were among the first supporters of the Line. Today the High Line Art Project, operated by the Friends of the High Line, commissions and develops temporary and permanent art. The High Line will also serve as the site of a future building of the Whitney Museum (to be designed by Renzo Piano).

When compared to the High Line, the potential of the Los Angeles River is 50 times larger in just its sheer size. The Los Angeles River is already operating in this vitality, it is just doing so under the veil of popular media.

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